インテリビレッジの
座敷童(ざしきわらし)
3
鎌池和馬
イラスト/真早
電撃文庫

雪女(ゆきおんな)
ロリ少女。よくぼーっとしていて、なにかと世話を焼きたくなる感じなのだが、出会った男性に求婚を迫ってくる習性を持つ、ある意味危険な妖怪。夏が苦手。
座敷童(ざしきわらし)
『田舎』がブランド化した地域『インテリビレッジ』に住む座敷童。巨乳なお姉さんである。忍の家に居候しているが、座敷童の『本来の仕事』は一切する気がなく、いつもハイスペックなゲームをプレイしている。
インテリビレッジの
座敷童③
鎌池和馬 イラスト/真早

もくじ

序　章 …… 010
第？章　全滅村へいらっしゃい …… 012
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デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

「ここ「問題」A000-級の男子と四人を残らず消すのと、私達教人を調べるのは、果たしてどっちが簡単でしょう？」
菱神 舞(ひしがみ まい)
艶美の姉。何か危険な仕事をしているらしいが、それはさておき性格も口調も軽く、ノリで生きている自由人。妹に似ず、胸が豊満。
「ねぇねぇスゴイナンこの辺って大きな半導体工場があるって聞いたやなかい…？」
「黙れクソガキ！に乗っかるな、ごぼん。その大きな工場やそこで働いている人の事はどうなんです？」
菱神艶美(ひしがみ えんび)
ツインテールな水着っ娘。「きな臭い事件現場」になぜか頻繁に出没する、推理マニアなイマドキ女子中学生。姉に似ず、胸が貧弱。
内幕 隼(うちまく はやぶさ)
殺人事件などの凶悪犯罪を扱う「一課」所属の刑事。恋にハマり気味な常連人……のはずが、熱血なところもあり、若干重病内で浮き気味。
「ないわ。感歌さんスポーツブラとかめっちゃないわー」
「え？　あのこれ？　いや様だんだよ。ホブラ組とかワイヤーとかが隠れるのって「貧乳」ですよー」
小手蜜感歌(にてみつ まどか)
恋の両親生。株取引などの金融関係の才能がある大金持ちで、甘々自由な生活をおくっている。金融系だけでなく、そのマネーパワーで様々なところにパイプがあるらしい。恋と一緒で見知らぬ廃村に取り残される。
陣内 恋(じんない しのぶ)
「インテリビレッジ」に住む高校生。こんな風貌だが立派なクラス委員。技術交流の一環でクラス旅行に出かけるが、なぜか見知らぬ廃村の中に取り残されていた。

インテリビレッジの
座敷童③

鎌池和馬
イラスト／真早

Prologue

This story has 100 puzzles hidden within it.

However, the locations of these puzzles are never given. This is not a children's quiz show after all.

All of you will search for these puzzles and their answers.

The questions and the answers are all given within the story.

The characters may speak an obvious question or they may think one within their mind.

Some of the puzzles are very important and deal directly with the core of the story and others are quite trivial and are not needed to reach the conclusion.

You may count on your fingers or prepare notes and writing equipment.

Please complete your preparations before attempting this story.

Now then.

I earnestly hope you can find the 100 puzzles and their answers.

-From Aoandon.

Chapter ?: Welcome to Zenmetsu Village

Part 1 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“Uuh…myuh…”

I felt a slight shaking and awoke. Only once I awoke did I realize I had been asleep. I was on a tour bus and most of those on board were my classmates and my homeroom teacher. The only exceptions were the bus guide and the driver.

The tour bus was driving along an elevated highway, but the outside scenery was almost entirely cut off by the tall soundproof panels covering the sides of the road. The bus was driving so smoothly I would never have guessed it was keeping steady at 80 kph.

Oh, that’s right.

We had a school trip at the start of September…

“Hey, hey, Shinobu-kun.”

The eccentric beauty Madoka-chan was saying something from her seat next to me.

This was not a case of a lovey-dovey space developing. As usual, she did not fit in with the rest of the class, so she had been forced to sit next to me, the class president.

“Shinobu-kun, why do you cling to the girl next to you while you nap?”

“Hagwah!?”

I frantically moved away from Madoka.

I-I have my reasons, Madoka-san! In fact, I think most personal mannerisms are deeply related to one’s household environment.

However, Madoka did not seem to mind.

“What a pain. They call this a trip, but we’re only headed to an Intellectual Village. Is this a way of exchanging technology?”

“Well, it’s a school event, so all of the events were decided on by some stuffy teacher. I do agree we need to make sure a school trip

doesn't involve a trip to a love hotel, though."

Also, three days and two nights was much too short. I had the feeling we would spend more time travelling between locations than staying put anywhere.

And then…

The head of a classmate (a guy) stuck up from the seat in front of me. It was as if he was peering over a fence. He was the guy known in our class as the Love King.

"Jinnai, we're almost to a zone simply filled with noteworthy things."

"What? We're on the highway. Are you the hopeless kind of student that buys a pile of souvenirs at the service area?"

"We're almost at Four Mountains. The scenery will change once we leave the tunnel," said the Love King while lightly waving around an expensive-looking mirrorless interchangeable-lens camera. "I hear there's a huge junction there and it's popular with people who like buildings and factories."

"…That's targeted toward an incredibly niche audience."

"No, don't make fun of it. Even sports stars have this hobby. It's widely recognized."

I wanted to argue that it didn't matter if famous people did it too, but I decided against it since that would just lead to a long, drawn-out debate.

"It's actually really large-scale and quite rare. As the name suggests, the junction is surrounded by mountains and tunnels on all four sides and it leads the cars into the tunnels. Well, it also seems the base of the junction is a highway exit and rumor has it the junction was created for the sake of a gigantic semiconductor factory. Is that really true, though?"

"…"

As the Love King continued speaking, Madoka looked out the window disinterestedly next to me. This was unsurprising since the Love King had been speaking only to me.

The atmosphere was a bit strained.

However, Madoka must have been used to this because she showed no sign of being hurt. Even now, she was using her cell phone to photograph a piece of chocolate shaped like an animal. It seemed she was trying to collect all of them, but…

What animals does she still need? I know the bottle cap doll's beckoning cat series had a total of 20 different kinds.

I could only come up with that completely unrelated data.

And as I thought, the tour bus entered the tunnel.

Was this tunnel through Suzaku Mountain?

For a highway tunnel, it was quite small. It did not even have the standard orange lights. As soon as the bus entered the tunnel, it was pitch black. The noise of the engine must have been echoing against the wall because we were wrapped in an odd distorted noise.

It was not a very long tunnel.

After only a few minutes, the white light of the exit came into view.

"It doesn't really matter, but will you even be able to photograph the scenery with the soundproof panels along the road?"

I received no response.

It was possible there was simply too much noise for him to hear.

It did not bother me much, so I gave a small yawn as the tour bus left the tunnel.

For an instant, the bright light of the sun blinded me.

But I would quickly adapt to it.

While I felt the thick moisture of fog on my cheek as I stood there, I raised a hand over my face to protect my eyes from the bright light.

And then I realized something odd.

"Huh?"

Why was I "standing". Just a moment before, I had been sitting in a

seat on a tour bus that was full to capacity.

And…

Where am I?

Why am I standing in the middle of a dense and dark forest?

I felt a pressure coming from all sides. It was as if invisible walls were pressing in against me.

The area spreading out around me was not a carefully maintained Intellectual Village plantation. Nor was it a walking path surrounded by negative ion oxygen. It was the type of place you felt like you would run into a group burying a corpse if you arrived at night with a flashlight in hand. Branches and leaves covered the sky. The sunlight was cut off, so the trees had to compete for the nutrients of the soil. Trees would kill off other trees and nature would rot nature. It was a truly “untouched” place. Thanks to the undergrowth that reached over a meter high and the great amount of ivy growing from branch to branch, many areas had almost developed into green walls.

I heard a solid clunking sound.

While still confused, I turned in the direction of the sound. I found a giant concrete pillar that seemed to stab through the green as it rose up.

“That’s part of the elevated highway… Then this must be…”

The surface of the concrete had the words Four Mountains printed on it. I realized I must have been in the area that stretched out below the highway. This was the basin surrounded by the mountains. According to the Love King, each of the four mountains had a tunnel and the Four Mountains Junction connected those tunnels in a cross shape. That meant this area was only a highway trip away from many different areas.

Is there any kind of village in this basin?

“I don’t see any houses…”

Then again, if I made my way through this deep forest and sought help at a home, I would probably be mistaken for a Yamanba.

In every direction I only found forest, forest, and more forest.

To put it bluntly, the conditions on the surface of Four Mountains was just about as bad as it could get.

You could be as ecological as you want, but too much nature was harmful.

But where did Madoka, the Love King, and my other classmates go?

Had they been “thrown from” the bus just like I had?

Or had I been the only one to disappear and the bus had continued along the highway without any trouble?

In other words…

“You have got to be kidding me… Don’t tell me I’ve been left behind.”

Part 2 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

People seem to do it a lot, so I hope you are not confusing the National Police Agency with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. The latter is the organization that upholds the public order of Tokyo. And so its Investigation Department 1 normally only handled incidents that occurred within the jurisdiction of Tokyo.

However, there were exceptions.

“Uchimaku, head out to Kinki right away.”

“…What?”

The department chief had a grim look when he arrived and that was the very first thing out of his mouth. I could not help but open my eyes wide.

He continued nevertheless.

“I assume you have heard Hasebe Michio is being transported.”

“Yes. Isn’t that unkillable death row inmate being transferred here from his previous regional location?”

I called him unkillable, but not because he was some ridiculous monster.

He had been sentenced to death in a murder case over twenty years prior, but the odds of it being a false accusation had been quite high from the beginning. After much heated debate, this prisoner’s execution had been pushed further and further back. That was why he was called “unkillable”. We were on the verge of finding out if a request for a retrial would be accepted or not, so the higher ups of the National Police Agency had called him in to Tokyo for a more detailed investigation.

The department chief continued speaking in a disinterested voice.

“His prison vehicle disappeared from Four Mountains Junction. It disappeared while on the highway. Both the policeman and the prisoner aboard may or may not still be alive. The prison vehicle has not even been found yet. Even its GPS signal vanished. To put it

bluntly, we have no idea what to do."

"…Seriously?"

"Normally, the search would be left to the local police, but this is no ordinary prisoner. I cannot deny the possibility of individuals or factions within the prosecutors and police who would find it troublesome for Hasebe to have a retrial. The organization's reputation is on the line once again."

Hasebe Michio had been in the process of being transferred from the regional police to the Tokyo police, so we did have an official reason for the two police departments to cooperate in this search.

"Are you saying it's possible someone might try to protect the police's reputation by making it look like Hasebe killed himself? That way the suspect dies before the retrial can take place."

"I do not know if anything that blatant will happen, but if the physical evidence is hidden, this could easily be treated as if Hasebe escaped of his own free will. Someone could be trying to crush any chance of a retrial by framing an innocent man of an arbitrary crime."

"…"

"At any rate, even if this is a joint operation, the local police will still do most of the work. We can only send someone to keep an eye on things. Uchimaku, I am sending you. Someone with no inconvenient titles will have the easiest time moving around. Carry out the role of a small fry like the small fry you are."

I did not like the reason I had been chosen, but I could not ignore an official order.

This is the painful part of being a police sergeant!

As the department chief handed me a ticket for a cheap seat on a domestic flight, I asked him something that had suddenly caught my attention.

"By the way, do you really think Hasebe was wrongfully accused?"

"I have no idea. I was not in charge of that case."

Part 3 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I stood still for so long I lost track of time.

I had been inside that tour bus, but had suddenly found myself standing in this forest upon exiting the tunnel.

It seemed I was in the untouched nature spreading out directly below the junction.

It was unclear what had happened to Madoka, the Love King, Nagisa, or my other classmates.

Incidentally, I had no food or water, so I really did not want to walk endlessly through the forest.

"…No good."

I had pulled out the cell phone in my pocket, but had groaned at the "no signal" indicator.

What hurt the most was how little about the situation I knew. If my other classmates were lost in this barricade-like forest as well, it might have been best to search through it as much as I could on my own. But it was possible I alone had been trapped in this strange situation. If that was the case, searching would be completely wasted effort. Walking through a deep forest while possibly stranded would only increase the risk of death. Doing that for an illusion that might not even be there was no laughing matter. …It may sound as if I am exaggerating, but being so lost you lose all sense of direction is no joke.

If I was to call for rescue or contact my classmates to see if they were okay, I needed my cell phone.

Not being able to use it was a serious issue when it came to deciding what to do next.

"That means…"

I looked over at the giant pillar towering up in front of me. It seemed to stab through that eerie nature that looked like new trees had grown on top of old rotting ones.

The rectangular pillar had a long narrow metal staircase leading up it while reversing back and forth countless times.

What is that staircase for?

Whatever the answer to that question, I would likely be able to make my way up onto the elevated highway using it.

If I walked along the shoulder of the highway, I could avoid being stranded in the forest. Emergency landline phones were set at fixed intervals in case of an accident, so I would be able to call for help as well.

However, there was one problem.

“This fog…”

The fog was so thick I was not sure I could see even a few meters ahead. With that fog enveloping everything, I was worried about my safety while walking along the highway, even if I was on the shoulder. The drivers might cautiously slow down a bit, but they would not be thinking about the possibility of pedestrians. If a car hit me, I would be sent straight to heaven.

Should I continue through the forest with the very real possibility of becoming stranded?

Or should I climb up onto the highway with masses of steel shooting by at high speed?

“What am I supposed to do…?”

Part 4 (Hishigami Enbi)

Tah dah!

I had made my way to Kansai Ocean Airport.

Unfortunately, it seemed less lively than Tokyo's Bay Coast International Airport. For one thing, it was not used much by sightseers or business travelers. Instead, it mainly shipped products of the western Intellectual Villages to various places.

Regional airports had their own difficulties.

And the focus on shipping allowed them to cut back on the service industry personnel costs for hotels or duty free shops.

"Wait a second, Enbi. What are you doing here on a weekday at the beginning of September? What happened to your required education?"

"Oh, detective. Just so you know, this really is a complete coincidence this time. …Of course, since we're here for the same reason, it's only natural we would eventually end up in the same place."

"You're the type of mystery freak that truly runs across incidents by coincidence, so running into you here is a very bad sign."

This removed any worries of wearing out a taxi driver from having him drive me around too much.

Instead, I could have my beloved detective drive me around in a rental car.

"Let me be very clear, mystery freak. I am here for work. I am being paid with the people's tax money, so I don't have time to deal with you."

"C'mon, c'mon. Let's go search for Hasebe Michio who disappeared from the highway at Four Mountains Junction!"

"You already know all that!? Where did you get that information from!?"

“What good would it do you to know that? What matters is that you will go through all the proper procedures to request cooperation from the regional police, but they will refuse to speak with you or even share any information with you. This will leave you with no choice but to come crying to Enbi-chan, the master of love and justice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Reality is not some travel mystery solved by a popular newspaper reporter and idiot policeman!!”

Fine, fine. Then just go ahead and try.

To make a long story short, the detective tried to call someone with his cell phone, searched the airport to see if anyone was waiting for him, and tried some other things.

It was the same as the opening scene of a 2-hour mystery with a black silhouette muttering to itself. Describing it all in detail would be a waste of time.

“D-did I do something horrible in a past life…?”

“The problem is that Hasebe is a troublesome prisoner due to the possibility of a false accusation. The old members of the regional police, the prosecutors, the judge, and everyone else with influence are extremely worried about this. Even the inside of their station is in complete disarray, so they don’t have time to handle someone sent in from Tokyo. Now just go get us a rental car.”

“Wait a second. I am a police officer of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. My jurisdiction does not leave the Tokyo metropolitan area. If the regional police refuse to cooperate, I have no authority here. I will be treated just like a normal person.”

“Do you think your boss in Department 1 will accept that excuse?”

To make a long story short, we made it to stage 2.

Hmm, not bad. He has the cell phone’s volume turned down yet I can still hear the yelling. …They don’t really serve katsudon when questioning you in Department 1, do they?

As expected, the detective was in tears.

“How does that damn chief think I can handle this with nothing but the standard right to apprehend someone caught in the act of a

crime!? And he told me not to come back until I had some results, but the lodging fees are going to come out of my pay, aren't they!?"

"C'mon, let's go. There are tons of people who would find it troublesome if Hasebe was found innocent and now he suddenly disappeared when he might finally get a retrial. We have no time to waste."

While half in desperation, the detective borrowed a rental car. I sat down in the passenger seat and fastened the seatbelt.

"Riding in a car alone with you is quite stimulating."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Does it remind you of the Shokei Island Serial Murders Case?"

"Don't bring up anything that ominous!!"

Part 5 (Jinnai Shinobu)

To be honest, I had not yet decided what to do at that time. After all, both options were too dangerous. On one hand, I had a deep forest I could easily end up stranded in if I casually decided to take a stroll through it. On the other hand, I had foggy highway on which cars could come flying toward me at high speed at any moment. Both options put my life at risk.

But the situation refused to wait for me.

It began with a noise.

It was an awfully metallic noise coming from directly above me. I looked up and realized it was the sound of someone walking on the narrow staircase installed along the pillar of the elevated highway.

For an instant, truly just an instant, I rejoiced.

To be honest, I had been horribly nervous up until this moment. I was surrounded by a rotting forest in every direction. If I had taken a photo, every single person I showed it to would probably have given it the title “stranded”. When I sensed another person’s presence a warm feeling filled my chest. It was as if I had been wandering through a blizzard on a snowy mountain and had spotted a cabin.

But…

Once I thought about it carefully, I realized this person was walking down into the thick forest from the elevated highway. The action itself was simple enough, but I could think of no reason for anyone to do that. After all, this was a thick forest. Unlike an Intellectual Village farm where a bunch of grapes was worth 30 thousand yen, there was no obvious reason to come here.

And…

I had been suddenly sent into this forest from a tour bus driving down that highway above. When something unexplainable happened, it was normal to first suspect a Youkai. However, there was one question I could not find an answer to.

What type of Youkai put into what kind of system could do this?

I had too few hints.

It was possible that metallic footstep was another hint. And of course, that hint would come with plenty of danger.

The footsteps continued.

What if someone had intentionally built a Youkai's power into their system to use it as a criminal Package and I alone had been taken from that tour bus?

Why then would this person be walking down the stairs toward the forest?

What if someone had created a situation with zero witnesses and was now descending the stairs to meet me?

"Dammit…"

I began digging through my pants pocket without even realizing it.

I knew there was nothing inside but my cell phone, but I still searched through it again and again.

"Dammit!!"

I was surrounded by the thick forest. I frantically grabbed a thick branch that had broken off a tree and begun to fuse with the greenery. I thought this would put me at ease, but the branch must have rotted all the way through because the middle crumbled as I picked it up.

Meanwhile, the footsteps showed no sign of stopping.

The noise grew louder.

The person was approaching the ground.

If this was truly the criminal (?), then they were using some Youkai's power. Wielding a tree branch might not be much help, but facing them unarmed would be too reckless.

But despite thinking that, I was unable to do anything.

If I had instead run off into the forest, the result might have changed.

The footsteps stopped.

The person had arrived at the final step.

They would now step onto the ground.

And this person was…

“…Madoka?”

Part 6 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I borrowed the cheapest, smallest, and least powerful rental car at the shop and headed out onto the highway. I was on my way to Four Mountains Junction where Hasebe Michio had disappeared while being transported. From my direction, I would travel through the Byakko Mountain tunnel. The western mountain was named Byakko and the southern one Suzaku, so it was an incredibly simple naming scheme.

The mystery freak was sitting in the passenger seat. (If I had not let her, I would be given the stigma of being a police officer who left a minor in a distant city.)

“Now then, detective. How much do you know about Hasebe?”

“You’re the amateur and I’m the professional, so shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Don’t call yourself a professional. You have no authority here.”

“Do you want me to open the door and shove you out?”

To relieve my annoyance, I chewed some xylitol gum.

The highway was not a lot of fun. The structures at set intervals with reflective panels, an emergency phone, and a small door must have been high-speed bus stops. It was tedious and I felt like I was going to fall asleep at a moment’s notice.

Meanwhile, Enbi seemed completely carefree in the passenger seat.

Despite most of the information being confidential, the mystery freak quickly began speaking on about it.

“It was 25 years ago on November 9. Someone broke into the house of the president of Kuroyama Electronics Group, a large Osaka precision equipment maker. They support the high-tech infrastructure of Intellectual Villages, so at the time, there was a lot of talk of it being related to *a large criminal organization*, political terrorism from those opposed to Intellectual Villages, or a foreign spy trying to steal their tech. But a major development came to light in January of the following year.”

As she spoke, the mystery freak used her index finger to operate her usual smartphone with the leather memo pad cover.

“The local police used footprints left at the crime scene to determine the maker and sales situation of the shoes. They used that to identify Hasebe Michio. In addition, the security camera from a store near the president’s house showed a figure that very closely resembled him. The police boldly arrested Hasebe Michio at the end of January.”

Afterwards, Hasebe had remained firmly silent in the interrogation room.

Hasebe had worked at a small factory in Osaka that had a contract with the Kuroyama Electronics Group. He had been highly skilled but had barely scraped by financially. At the time, the police had seen a motive there…but Hasebe had not actually done any better after the incident.

Due to my job, I could not speak easily about any of this, so Enbi continued speaking as if giving a one-man performance.

“At the trial, Hasebe finally began speaking and insisted he was innocent. He testified that he had been treated violently in the interrogation room. None of that was recognized, though. The local police had built up a large amount of small evidence and the media thoroughly manipulated the image of him they represented to turn him into a complete villain.”

Incidentally, that “large amount of small evidence” was all vague witness testimony that amounted to nothing more than circumstantial evidence and rumors.

Even their most conclusive evidence, the footprints, was not a proper form of biometrics like a fingerprint. Anyone could have made a copy of Hasebe’s shoe by buying the same size of shoe from the same maker, taking dirt from the small factory he worked at and around his home, and pressing it against the bottom of the shoe.

Even the figure that “closely resembled” him on the nearby security camera was from the grainy resolution of that time. Its credibility was only about 50/50. If someone who knew Hasebe Michio had chosen the exact same clothes he wore and worn them in the exact same way, they could likely have produced a figure that “closely resembled” him.

“The real problem are those that were involved in the investigation of Hasebe Michio back then,” I finally said in order to turn the conversation away from the case itself. Then again, this topic might actually be even more dangerous. “The department chief who gave the okay to arrest Hasebe received an irregular promotion to the Ministry of Justice, the judge from his trial is going through a national review to see if he will remain on the Supreme Court, and I heard one of the prosecutors is even sharpening his claws as the top aide to a member of the Lower House. In other words, all of them have a reason to not want Hasebe to get a retrial and be found innocent. *It would affect their brand image.*”

“So they want to ensure Hasebe is guilty no matter what. And if they can’t do that…?”

“Don’t just say things like that without any evidence.”

However, it seemed Hasebe had almost certainly been wrongfully accused. And it was true that I could not think of anyone else who might be glad to see him disappear from the highway while being transported.

When the odds were good he would be found not guilty, Hasebe himself had no reason to make himself vanish.

“Now then, detective. Once we leave the Byakko Mountain tunnel, we will be at the Four Mountains Junction. I happen to have heard some interesting rumors about that place.”

“What?”

“You could say it is like holy ground to someone with my interests,” said the mystery freak while looking like she was about to start drooling.

Given what interested her and pulled at her heartstrings, this was obviously not going to be something I wanted to hear.

“So, detective, have you ever heard of Zenmetsu Village?”

Part 7 (Jinnai Shinobu)

"…Madoka?"

My grinding nerves were released.

The person who had unnaturally walked down the stairs form the elevated highway was…

"Yes, it's your good friend the beautiful and celebrated Madoka-chan. Anyway, Shinobu-kun, where are we?"

As Madoka looked around, I noticed blades of grass and seeds were stuck to her sailor uniform in places. It did not look as if she was bruised or bleeding.

That much was fine. However…

"Where have you been up until now? You haven't seen any of the others, have you?"

"I don't know. Once we left the tunnel, I was suddenly thrown out into the fog. It was terrible. I was on the highway. There are better ways I could have been thrown out, you know? I noticed what had happened and quickly ran over to the shoulder, but if I had been a little slower, who knows what could have happened."

She had ended up in the middle of the highway.

My situation had been pretty bad, but Madoka's hadn't exactly been great either.

When I thought about it, the situation was almost unthinkable. People had disappeared from a tour bus driving along the highway.

How fast was that bus going anyway?

"So did the same thing happen to our other classmates?"

"I don't know. But I have not heard any brakes screeching, cars crashing, or ambulance sirens, so I may have been the only one tossed right into the middle of the road," said Madoka emptily as if it did not matter in the slightest to her.

It may have been too much to ask her to care about the others when she was so isolated from them.

“Oh, right. Madoka, can you use your cell phone?”

“No. Nothing works. I also tried using the emergency phone up on the highway, but I couldn’t reach anyone. I don’t know what happened, but the cord may have been cut since it did not even seem to be ringing on the other end.”

“The emergency phone…was broken?”

Those were supposed to be constantly maintained for emergencies like this. I occasionally heard on the news that overpasses, sewers, and other infrastructure was wearing down with age. This may have been the same.

I did not know what had happened to the tour bus, but it seemed most of Madoka’s luggage had left in the bus as well. All she had in hand was the animal-shaped chocolate she had been eating on the bus.

Oh, the animal chocolates Madoka still needs are the panda and the penguin.

I could only remember that useless piece of information.

“At any rate, heading up is unlikely to help much. I had a few cars fly by me through the fog, so you can be sure of that.”

“You’re kidding… So we have to make our way through this thick forest?” I muttered blankly.

But then a sudden idea came to me.

Is Madoka telling the truth? Or rather, is this Madoka who so conveniently appeared here really just a Kitsune or Tanuki? Or is this the real Kotemitsu Madoka?

If she was actually a transformation of whoever had sent me into this forest, she might be lying to keep me from heading up to the highway and using an emergency phone.

“Not being able to use the phone really hurts our situation. Same with the GPS.”

“I know what you mean. I haven’t been able to check the stock

prices for 15 minutes now. Not being able to do what you always do is so irritating."

"You could at least change that to checking a fortune-telling site or something cute like that, Madoka-san."

"This makes me want to start with the meaningless conspiracy theories. Having every option to use a phone taken from us makes me think there is some reason behind it."

"…Come to think of it, are you really okay with your money? Timing is everything in day trading, right?"

"Well, yes. In a world where every ten thousandth of a second counts, this is not okay at all. But I left it all in the hands of a Tokyo market advisor while I am on this trip. If he makes more than the target amount, he gets to keep it all as a bonus, but if he makes less, he has to pay it all back. That's the contract we made. Nothing that happens will hurt me any."

I had tried to ask her a leading question, but the answer I got was so complicated I had no idea if it was accurate or not.

Then again, someone who could supernaturally transform into her could likely act perfectly like her as well.

Madoka(?) cast an annoyed glance across the Japanese jungle filled with underbrush.

"What should we do now? And remember, heading back to the highway is out of the question."

The way she continued to stress that point bothered me a bit, but it was not too unnatural since she had seen firsthand how dangerous it was.

"But walking randomly through the forest is dangerous, too. We don't know the land and it might be filled with pit vipers and hornets."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"According to the Love King, Four Mountains Junction has an exit. It was rumored to have been built for a large semiconductor factory. In that case, we should be safe if we can reach either the tollgate or the factory. They should have a phone we can use there."

I was worried about our other classmates as well, but we had no map, we did not know which direction was which, and we did not know what kind of creatures lurked in this forest. With unknown after unknown, it was too dangerous to randomly search the forest. It would be best to inform someone what had happened so professionals could search for them as quickly as possible.

A white fog prevented us from seeing even a few meters ahead and the curtain of tall underbrush as well as the rotting trees blocked our path. It was about the worst possible path to take, but the highway fortunately ran above our heads. If we followed its shadow, we could keep on track to the tollgate.

Or so we thought.

It turned out we were too naïve.

When we actually began walking, we learned just how naïve we were after only five minutes.

“Dammit! I could have sworn we were walking straight. Where did the highway go!?”

“…At the very least, it is no longer overhead,” said Madoka as she looked up into the sky.

The sky we could see through the gaps in the trees was white rather than blue. It was completely covered in thick fog. We had suddenly realized the shadow of the highway had disappeared from the ground. The highway had of course not moved. We had obviously strayed from the proper route.

“Shinobu-kun. I think our direction strayed bit by bit as we took the easiest path while avoiding these thick trees.”

“…Should we head back?”

Fortunately, the tall underbrush we had parted to move forward had left an obvious trail to follow back.

Or so we thought.

“Wait, wait, wait. Where are we? We keep walking, but the highway’s pillar is nowhere to be seen.”

“We’re completely lost.”

We had only followed an obvious landmark and then followed our path back.

That was all we had done, yet where we actually stood and where we had been headed was continually off by a bit.

This was chaotic nature.

It was the polar opposite of a carefully maintained Intellectual Village.

I had thought I was well acquainted with “nature”, but the threat before my eyes here taught me that the village I lived in was like a food sample made of wax.

I had often heard that staying still was better than moving around randomly when lost in the woods or a mountain. I was now certain that was correct.

But that was when you had properly informed people that you were going to climb that mountain. It only applied when someone would automatically come looking for you if a certain amount of time had passed.

We had no way of knowing when this ridiculous fog would clear up.

It was possible it was not just temporary weather. If it had to do with the terrain, it might remain for an entire season or even year round. And if the fog was related to a Youkai…

For one thing, how were you supposed to report that someone had suddenly disappeared from the highway? Who would believe that?

If only Madoka and I had disappeared and the tour bus had continued on perfectly fine, it would be up to our classmates and homeroom teacher to report it. However, they knew where we had disappeared from but not where we had disappeared to. The police and fire fighters might not believe that, and even if they did, they might not immediately guess correctly that we were in the forest of Four Mountains. In our situation, we could die of thirst after waiting just two or three days, so we could not rely on carefree optimism.

And if everyone on the bus was wandering around somewhere like us…

At any rate, we had no way of knowing if help was coming.

The situation might not improve if we carelessly lay around. It was possible we would simply dry up and die.

“Four Mountains Junction is in an area surrounded by four mountains, right? It isn’t that large an area.”

“I would say it is only a few kilometers across from one end to the other. …Don’t tell me you’re planning to move from one end to the other.”

“If we’re lucky, we’ll run across the highway or one of the pillars supporting it. In the worst case, we’ll run into the mountain which we know has a tunnel through it. It’s a bit dangerous, but heading to the tollgate over the highway might be best.”

Given the land, that plan did not sound too difficult.

After all, the highway at Four Mountains Junction was built in a cross shape, leading to four tunnels through four mountains. If we cut randomly across the basin between the mountains, the odds were good we would run cross the highway at some point.

Madoka elegantly wiped sweat from her face with a small folded up handkerchief.

“I suppose that is our only option. A money-loving girl like me does not like forcing our way through every option until something works like this.”

“We need to find the highway before we seriously need to worry about food and water.”

“We will be trying to walk straight, but we won’t end up walking around and around in circles, will we?”

“Just because you can’t read the atmosphere is no reason to bring up that forest legend at a time like this!!”

And so we began moving.

The rotting trees covered the sky above our heads and even the shortest undergrowth was about a meter tall. Luckily, the leaves were not hard like bamboo grass, so we did not scrape ourselves as we walked through it.

“I’m soaking wet,” said Madoka.

“So am I… But with this much liquid, we shouldn’t have to worry about water. Food will still be a problem, though.”

“Have you forgotten how near the highway we are? With all the exhaust mixed in, who knows what color this water would make a litmus test turn.”

“Stop exaggerating. And you can’t exactly complain if it’s that or die of thir-…”

I trailed off at that point.

What had Madoka-san said?

She was wearing her usual summer sailor uniform that girls had enough trouble with bra straps showing through under normal conditions. And she was soaking wet now?

I needed to calmly check on this from my current position. In this thick, rotting forest, even the shortest undergrowth was about a meter tall. Madoka was wearing a skirt, so making her pass through that undergrowth first would have been unfair. I, Jinnai Shinobu-kun, had taken the extremely gentlemanly role of walking ahead and parting the undergrowth to create a simple path for her.

And that left an important question in my mind…

What color is Madoka-chan’s bra!?

The answer to that very simple question was right behind me. If I only turned around, I would find “Kotemitsu Madoka Presents: The Pink Paradise” before my eyes. The problem was that I needed a reason to turn around!

From her tone of voice, Madoka probably hasn’t noticed her unguarded state yet. This is my chance! My only chance!! I need to use my 105 IQ intellect to its fullest to think up an excuse!! If I don’t, I know I’ll regret it for the rest of my life and be plagued by nightmares every-

“Shinobu-kun? Why are you being so quiet?”

“Kyaah kyaah!! Don’t come peeking over all of a sudden, little kitten!!”

I did not even need to turn around. Madoka had circled around in

front of me. I was not yet mentally prepared and my timing was thrown off. However, shutting my eyes now was what a coward pretending to be a pure boy would do. Even as my heart felt as if it would leap out of my throat, I chose the exemplary answer of opening my eyes wide with anticipation!

And Kotemitsu Madoka's flower garden was finally revealed to me.

Her thin sailor uniform had been easily penetrated by the moisture. What this revealed was…

A plain gray sports bra.

"……
Tch."

"Wait, Shinobu-kun. Wait a second. Could you stop looking so disappointed and tell me what happened?"

"This is wrong. A sports bra is just wrong on you! You're not a sports girl!! You have no reason to end up there!!"

"Eh? Oh, this? It's just more comfortable this way. I don't like how bra straps and wires scrape and rub."

"That reason is terrible too!! Nothing about this is sexy!! That's the reasoning of a middle-aged woman! If you said that was the uniform of a girls' boxing club, you could walk right by a police box in your underwear and no one would stop you!!"

"Underwear is underwear; it's not a swimsuit. I would be too embarrassed to do that."

"…Then why aren't you trying to hide your chest?"

"Oh, well, it is a sports bra, after all."

"So you admit it! You admit a sports bra isn't even remotely sexy!!"

There were several types of "indifferent girls": the kiddy type, the pure white bra and panties type, the "doesn't care at all so she actually goes for really showy sexy lingerie" type, etc. Each of them was filled with its own type of dreams.

But a sports bra that could pass for a summer shirt despite being underwear?

And because she didn't like straps?

"No, no!! Redo! I want a redo! I imagined a bourgeois like you would definitely wear silk underwear with tons of ribbons and frills!!"

"Okay, okay. I get it, Shinobu-kun. Next time, I will wear striped panties that tie together with strings on either side. That should be filled with plenty of dreams, so calm down."

That makes it sound like I can't hope for anything from her panties either, but is that true?

After being consoled by Madoka who was only interested in money and organic vegetables, I managed to recover from a mental state one step away from breaking down into tears.

Madoka then casually changed the subject.

Her tone was no different from a classmate asking if we should stop by somewhere afterschool.

"By the way, Shinobu-kun. I apologize for bringing up this kind of thing again, but I know of an incident about this area that is about as pleasant as your average forest legend."

"…Do you have to bring it up now?"

"It's called Zenmetsu Village. I only heard about it from Enbi, so I don't actually know if that is the official name or not.[1] Over 30 years ago, it seems an crazy mass murderer in the village slaughtered everyone who lived there!! Supposedly, the murderer used pitchforks, hoes, axes, and all sorts of other farm tools."

"Asking you indirectly to stop wasn't enough! A crazy mass murderer!? I don't want to hear anything worrying right now! Please understand that!!"

I rubbed at my wet hair with one hand, but Madoka was not listening.

"Well, it's just your stereotypical legend about an eccentric village. There are legends almost anywhere in Japan or even the world about people getting lost in the mountains or forest and running across a house or village with some strange custom."

“Are you saying it’s so common it actually has no credibility? Are you saying we should just laugh it off as nonsense?”

“The story has plenty of embellishments. Some say the murderer is still alive, some say his descendants are wandering around here, and others say a murder group decided this was holy ground to them and so they live in a psychedelic commune here. I hear there are even rumors that *the entire village wanders around Four Mountains.* Supposedly, the victims desperately tried to flee the village, but the deserted houses circled around to cut off their escape.”

After hearing that much, even I was not all that worried.

The overall impression was too scattered and mismatched.

It was unclear whether it was supposed to be a Youkai using its monstrous power to cause some supernatural phenomenon or if it was a human murderer going on a rampage with the tools around him.

There were of course incidents in which humans used Youkai powers, but those Youkai Packages had to be broadly and finely prepared with a group of dozens if not hundreds of people. They were used for bank robberies, scams involving large sums of money, and insurance fraud murders. In those cases, everyone involved had an obvious common desire. The story of Zenmetsu Village did not seem the same.

“It sounds like a story people in the city made up despite not knowing how Youkai and Packages work.”

“Yes. But they are not trying to insult rural areas. The cities have plenty of their own rumors about eccentric groups, be they underground organization or online communities. No matter where you go in Japan, everyone loves hearing stories about eccentric people.”

…Madoka, I don’t think you’re in any position to call other people eccentric.

This may have been an excellent example of why it was commonly said to look at others for an example of what to do and what not to do.

“But on the other hand…” began Madoka.

She trailed off when the area before us suddenly opened up.

The quality of the soil must have changed because the tall undergrowth that had blocked our way before had dried up and died off. The damp trees were still there, but the disappearance of the obstructing underbrush changed what we could see by quite a bit.

And something was visible up ahead.

They were rocks the size of rectangular 18-liter cans…or should I call them stones? They were more black than gray and standing up on end. Unlike bricks, the surface was rough. They were likely made by hand.

At first glance, they were reminiscent of gravestones. Or perhaps handmade trophies.

And…

A quick estimate told me there were over 50 of them. They were lined up so neatly it made me think someone obsessive had arranged them.

“What…are those?”

I could feel my throat drying up despite the fog that seemed to moisten my body just by standing in it.

Zenmetsu Village.

Rumor had it a crazy mass murderer in the village had slaughtered all the other villagers. This plot of awkward gravestones gave concrete color to that otherwise blank information.

Madoka’s mouth flapped open and closed a number of times after she had trailed off earlier, but she finally continued while sounding apologetic.

“…Since Enbi always shows up at the scenes of strange murders and she was talking so excitedly about this, perhaps we should assume it has a bit more credibility than some nonsense story.”

Part 8 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Once we left the tunnel, we were surrounded by a ridiculous amount of fog.

I instinctually let off the gas a bit. After I checked the dropping value on the speedometer, I refocused my eyes on the distance.

For some reason, Enbi was rejoicing in the passenger seat.

She looked like a kid when school was cancelled due to a typhoon.

“Hyah! You can’t see more than a few meters ahead.”

“Yes, that’s right. Dammit. If it’s this bad, I wouldn’t be surprised if they blocked off the road until it clears.”

I started to reach for the switch to the fog lamps, but they were not made to see through fog during the day. They were meant to inform oncoming traffic of your presence. I doubted they would be of much help on a highway with both directions completely cut off from each other.

The mystery freak went out of her way to point toward the shoulder of the road.

“A few police cars are stopped there.”

“I can tell that from their lights.”

“And a prisoner transport vehicle.”

“!?”

I instinctually turned my head to check behind me, but quickly remembered that could get me killed on the highway. I checked the rearview mirror, but it had all disappeared into the fog.

Instead of slamming on the breaks, I gradually decelerated and pulled over onto the shoulder.

I parked the rental car there.

“Should you really stop here?”

“I’ll turn on the hazard lights and set up the reflector.”

“You have the same authority as a normal person right now. Won’t you get in trouble for parking alongside the highway for no good reason?”

“If you can tell when you aren’t supposed to do something, why don’t you think about your own actions more often?”

I opened the door and stepped out onto the asphalt. I removed a triangular reflector from the trunk and set it up on the road. The mystery freak and I then walked back the way we had come.

“…This is a surprisingly long distance.”

“It was several dozen seconds along the highway.”

It was probably 300 to 500 meters. Due to the thick fog, there was nothing to judge the distance by. I lost track of how far I had walked, but that was my guess as to the distance. After walking for a while, a large and dense shadow appeared on the shoulder of the road. It was a police car.

“Now, detective, show me a realism-focused drama depicting the complexity of the police organization.”

“Thanks for that not even remotely funny lead-in.”

“Oh, if you want to start shooting up the place like a Showa era police drama, just tell me. I’ll provide backup.”

“By any chance are you looking forward to seeing a struggle between two adults in suits?”

Then again, I doubt we’ll be able to peacefully talk like we’re tourists.

This troublesome issue was deeply related to the higher ups and old members of the regional police and they had completely ignored the normal procedures when reinforcements had arrived from Tokyo. They had even denied me the bare minimum of sharing investigation data.

A police detective with no authority would be just as annoying as a mosquito flying around one’s ear.

As long as they kept things on a level that would not leave any official records behind, they might try to rough me up a bit.

But that made the mystery freak's presence an issue.

If they tried to rough me up, we could likely settle it like adults, but… Well, I simply had to hope they would be above grabbing at the collar of an amateur middle school girl.

If they did do that, the situation would have passed the level where it could be "settled like adults".

Ugh, please don't let this turn into a serious fistfight. I'm only in a dead end job with little hope of promotion.

At any rate, I maintained a bit of a defensive stance as I approached.

"…Wait a second. There's no one inside the police car."

"Maybe they went over to the prisoner transport vehicle."

"Without locking the doors and with the engine running?"

"I see your point."

Police cars were common in dramas, but those usually had drama original paint jobs. Each police station had its different designs and actual police officers would not agree to have pictures or videos of their cars taken. If perfect copies were made, they could be used for abductions and attacks on armored cars transporting money.

It was unlikely a police officer would leave one just sitting out like this.

As we continued along the shoulder of the highway, we found several more empty police cars dotting the shoulder. Beyond them was the prisoner transport vehicle.

It was a dark blue.

A small bus had been completely covered in armor plates and the windows had been sealed with thick metal bars. That should be enough to imagine it.

However…

"Why is it on its side?"

"Don't ask me."

“I would also love to know why the door is open.”

“If you could know the answer before doing the detective work, we would all have it a lot easier.”

The prisoner transport vehicle had fallen onto its side such that it was completely contained within the shoulder of the highway.

It did not seem to have crashed full speed into the central divider or the accident prevention wall. It was not damaged enough for that. There were no other damaged vehicles to be seen. Glass shards and light covers were strewn across the road, but it did not seem any other vehicle had been involved.

“It looks like the driver attempted a car stunt and failed.”

“Why would they do that?”

I called out randomly but received no response. I circled out to the front and tried to peer in through the windshield, but it was filled with small cracks, making the entire thing white. I could not see inside through it.

That left only one way to find out what the situation was inside: use the door pointed up due to the vehicle falling on its side.

Fortunately, the prisoner transport vehicle had police lights on the top and they were quite large and blocky. I was able to use them as footing to forcibly climb up.

The right-hand side was pointing straight up, so the window was at my feet. It was a prisoner transport vehicle, so the cracks running through the glass were oddly similar to the windshield. The cracks had spread across the entire window, but it had not shattered apart like a normal window would have.

Does it have a special film placed across it?

“Detective, anyone in there?”

“I’m about to check.”

I moved my gaze from the window and moved toward the open door. The vehicle was essentially the same as a bus, so a tall, narrow automatic door that opened with compressed air was located near the driver’s seat.

I lay down on the side pointed up and stuck my upper body down through the door.

What I saw in my upside down vision was…

"…?"

"Detective!"

I heard the mystery freak calling for me, but I could not reply.

There was nothing.

No one was inside.

There must have been a driver, one or more police officers, and a prisoner, but not a single person remained. Helped by being flipped on its side, the completely deserted vehicle looked like a bizarre abstract painting with a theme of space or weightlessness.

I pulled my upper body out through the door.

I thought for a bit.

Was this a complete accident or did someone plan this? Did the police evacuate the prisoner from the vehicle or did the prisoner take the police with him as hostages?

Either way, I knew that Hasebe Michio really had disappeared.

I had the information I needed to report, so I pulled out my cell phone while still standing on top of the toppled prisoner transport vehicle.

But…

"…Why can't I get through? I thought all trains and highways these days had a perfect net environment."

"If you're pulling out your phone, does that mean you saw something dangerous?"

Seeing those sparkling eyes turned toward me made me not want to explain it to her.

Part 9 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The eerie sight of so many obviously handmade gravestones caused me to stand still in shock. Madoka then spoke up from beside me.

“Shinobu-kun, is that a snake?”

“!”

That light sense of unknown disgust was overwritten by a possible direct threat. Living in a rural area had not turned me into an expert on snakes, but I did know it was best to not be bit by a strange snake. And that was especially true when an ambulance could not be called.

And so I turned cautiously in the direction Madoka was pointing.

“…That’s…a snake?”

My statement became a question.

It was true that something long and narrow was stretched along the dried grass, but a close inspection showed it was not moving.

However, it did not seem to be a shed skin or a dead snake.

“Isn’t it just a rope?”

“Oh?”

Madoka and I approached to check.

It may have grown wet in the thick fog because it was oddly dark, but it was indeed a rotted rope. It seemed to have been left here for a long time because it had thick green moss on its surface and had almost fused with the ground.

I did not want to touch it because it was dirty, but it looked rotten enough that it would tear apart if I tugged on it.

Also…

“Hey, Shinobu-kun. Is this one of those things you see at Shinto shrines?”

“What do you call those? …I can’t remember the name.”

Those things with white paper folded in zigzags. .[2]They’re attached to the ends of the staffs that priests wave around and decorate the shimenawa. …Um, what do we call those things?

After thinking that far, my cheek twitched.

…Shimenawa?

“With these gravestone-like things and this strange rope… It feels like there are too many weird decorations here.”

“Do we really have to continue on through here?”

“Would you rather turn back?”

“That’s even worse.”

No matter what we said, we had to continue on. If we turned back or tried to circle around the place, we would be putting ourselves at greater risk of walking in circles.

Madoka and I continued forward while weaving between the gravestones.

It was not long before another odd object showed itself through the fog.

“…What is that?”

A sort of barricade cut across the path.

The front had a row of logs carved down like pencils and crossing each other. A horizontal log placed across them was tied in place with a rope. A line of those was placed to block our path. They appeared to be as old as the shimenawa we had seen before. The cuts on the logs had turned black and the initially sharp tips had rotted away. They also had moss and mushrooms growing on them.

Seeing them brought a few different thoughts to mind.

Madoka made a blunt comment from next to me.

“They must not have had a very high IQ.”

“I thought you would say that.”

“And these gaps are wide enough that they must have been keeping cars out instead of animals. They are violently displaying that their #1 rule is not welcoming outsiders. …Hmm, this is looking more and more like one of those eccentric village legends Enbi likes.”

“So is this Zenmetsu Village? If that rumor was true, the villagers have all been gone for over 30 years.”

“Horror stories are often decorated with the idea of the dead villagers’ ghosts or the mass murderer’s descendants to scare off any groups that might try to stop by for a test of courage.”

“Why would the victims turn into crazy killers? The only one at fault was the crazy killer who ran around with farm tools in hand.”

The X portion of the log barricades had a fair-sized gap below them. The same was true for the log passing horizontally. As Madoka had said, it seemed to be meant for vehicles. If I crouched down, I could easily pass under it.

Madoka jokingly said, “Welcome to Zenmetsu Village.”

“This village disappeared 30 years ago, right? So why can’t I see any roads or telephone poles?”

“Wouldn’t the roads have been buried below the trees and underbrush?”

“Asphalt wouldn’t turn to dirt no matter how long you waited. And what about the telephone poles?”

“They might be buried underground.”

“Even though this wasn’t a carefully maintained Intellectual Village?”

We walked across the dead grass. A rotting clearing was visible where the trees had at one point been knocked over and pulled out by someone.

Even my leather shoes were beginning to grow damp at this point. My socks felt disgusting. The school uniform was an inconvenient outfit no matter what you were trying to do. It was not suited for any kind of physical activity and it was not all that comfortable. I didn’t particularly care for the design either. On top of all that, it was expensive. That was only because everyone was required to

buy it. If a normal store tried to sell them, they would stop stocking them almost immediately.

After five or ten minutes, the scenery began to change.

It happened just as I was beginning to doubt whether we had actually been travelling as straight as I thought we had.

"…That's a building, right?"

"It looks like nothing more than a shack. In fact, it's really just a storage shed."

There was something there.

It was about five meters square and only maybe two meters tall. It had been made of thin plywood and strengthened with corrugated galvanized iron or something. The thin metal roof was forcibly held down with heavy stones. Simply put, the overall quality was on a level that even the pig from the Three Little Pigs that built the house of straw would laugh at.

The metal surface had rusted brown and it looked like it would break apart if we so much as touched it. It had a small window the size of the side of a goldfish tank, but I could not tell if the glass was frosted or if it was simply so dirty it had lost all transparency.

I could not see inside, but it was so dirty I would have preferred to stay out in the rain than take cover inside.

In fact, a closer inspection showed it was slightly tilted diagonally like a parallelogram. The instant I peeked inside, I could end up buried alive.

"It doesn't look like anyone is living inside."

"There's something over here."

We circled around behind the dilapidated cabin and found two objects that had turned brown from rust.

One was a metal drum.

The upper lid had been fully opened like a can of food and something like gravel had been spread across inside. However, some strange weeds were growing all across its surface.

“That metal drum has a faucet at the bottom. What is it?”

“Is it a water filter?”

If they had one of those, they must not have had running water.

And the other rusted object was a diesel generator of the type seen at the stands for temple festival fairs. However, I could see a small pipe that had completely crumbled, so I did not even need to imagine what sort of disaster would occur if someone actually poured fuel into it.

“Both the electricity and water were produced at home. What era were they living in?”

“It is looking unlikely we will find a working phone line here.”

“I’m not even sure we’ll find a red mailbox.”

We had no reason to search inside the crumbling cabin. We simply needed to cut across the basin surrounded by the four mountains and make our way to the elevated highway. The water filter must have excited Madoka’s health fanatic blood because she was showing a lot of interest in it, but I called toward her and suggested leaving the cabin.

As we continued through the thick fog, we found four of five similar buildings that also looked more like old storage sheds than houses. Each of them had the remains of a generator and metal drum as if that was a decided practice.

“If water filters were so common, did they not even have a well? They would have to go gather water in their daily cycle this way.”

“I don’t see any compressed gas cylinders. It doesn’t look like they have pipes running underground for town gas.”

They must have lived by drinking river water and cooking over a fire.

Even if the village had been abandoned for 30 years, this was clearly strange. The level of their lifestyle seemed too isolated.

Some of the shed-like cabins had their window broken, some had their pillars broken, and one’s roof had even crumbled down.

And…

As I casually glanced over at the crushed cabin, I saw something unpleasant.

“Uuh…”

It was green moss covering the floor.

However, there was an odd pattern to how it had spread. As if it had grown only in the remains of an old puddle, the green color dyed only a limited area.

This reminded me of something.

It of course reminded me of the stories about Zenmetsu Village.

“By any chance…did that grow from dried blood and the moisture of this thick fog?”

“Shinobu-kun, it’s over here too.”

Madoka pointed toward a cabin with a broken window.

A glance inside that window showed green moss growing on the walls, ceiling, and floor as if it had splattered everywhere. But the moss had not made its way into that building quite as much, so stains colored an odd dark brown could be seen in places.

It was at least old enough that there was no raw smell of iron.

But the visual was enough.

“Wait, wait, wait. How did the blood get all the way up on the ceiling?”

“Zenmetsu Village really was the golden age of crazy killer legends.”

“I prefer to think someone who heard the rumors spread chicken blood around as a prank.”

Feeling fed up with it, I began to turn away from the window, but then I looked back.

…Oh?

“What is it, Shinobu-kun.”

“Nothing really…”

I circled around to the front of the cabin. The door was made to slide to the side, but the wooden rails had rotted away. I removed the door that was simply standing in place and leaned it against the wall. I then peered inside.

I saw dust, moisture, mildew, moss, and bloodstains.

Someone had apparently lived here, but I was not about to remove my shoes before going inside.

“I thought you weren’t going to check inside?”

“I wasn’t…but look.”

I pointed inside the small cabin and stepped inside to pick something up.

But then…

My right foot broke through the holey wooden panels and my leg sank down up to the calf.

“Ow!?”

“Shinobu-kun, be careful when you pull your leg out. If the edges dig into your skin, it will probably hurt a lot.”

I would have been careful whether she had warned me or not.

I slowly removed my leg. It seemed I had not really broken through the floor. It was the cover to a storage space under the kitchen that had broken. Naturally, no food was kept inside. Dirt had been swept inside the rectangular space which contained…the scattered remains of an old broken jar.

I initially thought I might have been the one to break it, but it seemed I was not. The edges of the pottery pieces had darkened after being left there for a long time.

“What are those?”

“It looks like a bunch of gold rings. Were they being stored in the jar?”

“They do not look like pure gold, though. They look quite cheap.”

“Of course they are. Someone who had a secret stash of pure gold wouldn’t be living in such a run-down shack.”

There was also some Japanese paper that was falling apart from the moisture. Ink had been used to write something in kanji on them, but…

“It’s written so quickly, I can’t read it.”

“Hmm…”

I pulled out my phone and took a photo.

The Zashiki Warashi might be able to decode that old writing. Nothing could be done at the moment though because my phone had no signal.

“Looking at this is not going to help us. Shinobu-kun, what were you pointing at before?”

“Oh, right. That over there.”

Madoka seemed to notice what was placed just outside the green moss zone.

“Oh? They have a gas range. The kind used for pots.”

“It doesn’t look all that rusted, does it?”

Is it simply for cooking or does it have some other purpose?

I thought about turning the knob to see if it produced a flame, but decided against it. If something was wrong with the compressed gas cylinder, it could explode.

Instead, I took off the protective cover and removed the gas cylinder.

The bottom of the cylinder had the manufacture date written on it.

“Shinobu-kun, what does this look like it says to you?”

“It looks like February of this year to me.”

“Same here. …But why would this be here in Zenmetsu Village which was supposedly abandoned 30 years ago?”

Madoka and I exchanged a glance.

And then…

An unpleasant noise came from outside the cabin as if something had banged against the wall.

I lived in an Intellectual Village, but for the apartments I saw on TV, this may not have been that odd a noise. However, this was an abandoned village. This was Zenmetsu Village where the villagers had been slaughtered over 30 years ago. We should not have heard something hitting the wall. There should not have been anyone here but us.

“Maybe someone came here as a test of courage?”

“In the middle of the day?”

“Maybe one of our classmates is here?”

“Why would they not say anything?”

“Maybe it’s a bear or Youkai?”

“I do not see how that is any less dangerous.”

Than what?

Both Madoka and I knew the answer, but neither of us wanted to say it.

This was Zenmetsu Village.

The villagers had all been slaughtered using farm tools like hoes and pitchforks.

A crazy mass murderer lived here.

And in that case…

The worst possible answer was…

A scraping sound began to travel along the wall. This was not the sound of someone leaving the cabin. It sounded like they were following the wall around.

Around to where?

The answer was simple. All too simple.

This cabin was a shabby building that was really nothing but a storage shed. Its design was very simple. It had only one door and the window was too small to enter or exit through.

Which meant…

Whoever was outside was circling around to the single entrance

“Sh-Shinobu-kun…”

Madoka’s face had grown pale.

I looked around, but it was hopeless to look for a tool to cover the door now. For one thing, the rails were broken and the door had only been standing in place.

What did we need?

What could function as a weapon? The wood materials, the sliding screen, and everything else had absorbed so much moisture they were practically falling apart. If I hit something with them, I had a feeling the wood would fall apart like wet paper.

And as I thought, I could hear it.

The sound continued. I heard scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping.

I could hear an object being dragged along the wall and I could hear the footsteps of someone circling around to the sole entrance and exit.

We had no time.

The eerie legend of Zenmetsu Village was beginning to swallow us alive.

Part 10 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

The mystery freak and I made our way back to the rental car parked on the shoulder of the highway.

“Are we headed for Zenmetsu Village down below?”

“Of course not,” I spat out as I brought the car up to speed. “We know Hasebe Michio really did disappear from the prisoner transport vehicle. Who knows if it was him or the police that did it, but whoever did it will want to ensure he remains ‘vanished’. They won’t be hiding near the vehicle.”

“I thought those who do not want Hasebe to be found not guilty just had to ensure he died before the retrial?”

“Yes, but it makes no sense to have him vanish like this if that’s the case. Mystery freak, what do you think the quickest way to kill Hasebe in that situation would have been?”

“To throw him out onto the highway. After all, this fog is too thick to see even a few meters ahead of you.”

“They could also sprain his ankle to make sure he can’t move. As long as they keep it at a level that looks natural,” I agreed. “But they didn’t do that. They went out of their way to have Hasebe ‘vanish’. In that case, they may want to do something that takes some time. I can’t say what they are after, but the odds are good Hasebe is still alive at this point.”

“They might shoot him and disguise it as him trying to escape and giving them trouble while they try to arrest him again.”

“If so, this is our last chance. We need to use our time effectively.”

We were on our way to the tollgate connected to the junction.

From what I had heard, it had been created as an exit for a semiconductor factory.

“If Hasebe himself ran off, he’ll need some means of transportation. I doubt he would try to escape on foot in these mountains. That means he would head where cars are parked. My guesses are the workers at the tollgate or the parking lot for the semiconductor

factory.”

“If the police are involved, they might have had someone come by on the highway and stuffed Hasebe in their trunk.”

“But they need to camouflage it as if Hasebe escaped. Either way, a nearby car will have to be stolen. If we know the model and number of the car used for camouflage, it can help us pursue them.”

“I hope they thought it through that far.”

“You have a point. True idiots are the hardest to read.”

I drove down the junction that circled around like a spring or naruto. Eventually, the rental car made it to the surface. The tollgate had become mostly unmanned with electronic toll collection, but I chose the less efficient manned gate.

“Detective, I hope the tollgate worker hasn’t disappeared.”

“I don’t think I could stand it if everyone had disappeared.”

An extremely bored looking man in his forties tossed aside a sports newspaper and fed the ticket I handed him into a machine.

“3200 yen.”

“I’m not the best driver, so is this fog going to last? I’ve been so nervous that my grip on the steering wheel has been terribly stiff.”

“3200 yen.”

“Have there been any accidents? I’m just so nervous.”

“3200 yen.”

“…Answer my questions, goddammit.”

With a sigh, I showed him my police badge and tossed it toward the passenger seat. After all, a close look would have shown I was from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. With all the realistic police dramas in recent years, a lot of people were oddly familiar with the organization and structure of the police.

The middle-aged man turned a doubtful look toward the mystery freak in the passenger seat.

“Are you really a cop? Who’s that girl?”

“Oh, oh, oh!! My position is that of an observer and a future wife, so-…!!”

“She’s a runaway girl I picked up in the area. That’s why I’m asking about the situation. You check on the people going on and off the highway, right?”

I-I technically didn’t lie.

I was just using a reallllllly broad definition of “in the area”. The entire Kinki region was “in the area”. I never said a word about finding her walking along this highway.

I had only shown him my badge because I felt like it.

If the man decided to talk to me because he mistook me for a member of the regional police, that was not my problem.

That was the excuse I had to make, or I would be in a lot of trouble! This is what it’s like to be a poor public servant!!

“Hmm. Well, I haven’t heard about any accidents. I haven’t been told to block off the highway, either. Are you sure that girl didn’t walk off from a service station on the other side of one of the mountains? She might have wandered off along the shoulder of the road while her parents were shopping.”

Oh, c’mon. Please do your job.

At the very least, a prisoner transport vehicle and some police cars had been abandoned on the highway leading toward Byakko Mountain.

“Any other questions? You didn’t just find a girl walking along the shoulder of the road while on a patrol. I’ve never heard of a traffic cop using a rental car while watching for speeding drivers.”

“Oh, right. Do you have a phone here?”

“No, I don’t. A long time ago, some idiot used an automated internet bank service while on the clock. It seems he ended up accidentally leaving the phone off the hook for several weeks. The higher ups got pissed at the huge bill and confiscated all the phones. They said to use our cell phones if we needed anything.”

“Eh? But our cell phones…”

“Yeah, the signal doesn’t reach out here at all. It’s terrible.”

That means you can’t call for help if a robber attacks. Do you not understand how dangerous it is being in such a remote location?

Well, if he can do this for so long, it just goes to show how peaceful this country is.

“Do you have something urgent to call someone about? What is it?”

“I have information a group of car thieves has moved into the area. Have you seen anyone suspicious recently?”

“Nope,” replied the middle-aged man right away. “In fact, isn’t this about the worst place for them? There’s nothing to steal here.”

“If you say so.”

“After all, there aren’t even any villages here. There are no cars to target.”

Enbi leaned over the driver’s seat much farther than was necessary.

She said, “Hey, hey, mister. I thought there was a huge semiconductor factory here.”

“Shut up, you damn brat. Get off of me. Ahem, what about that large factory and the cars of the workers?”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.” The middle-aged man must have entered gossiping mode because he stuck his elbow up on the money counter as he replied. “It’s true almost all the people who get off at the exit are related to the factory in some way. After all, over 8000 people work at it. It’s almost a small town in and of itself. All our income down here comes from that one factory. With the employees and shipments of materials and products coming in, we get a few thousand people coming in and out each day. It makes us plenty happy.”

“Then aren’t there a lot of cars?”

“There are, but they’re all in the factory parking lot. The people running the factory understand that the workers would be in trouble if they lost their car in this area that’s practically an isolated island. The entire parking lot is kept in the factory grounds and is

surrounded by a thick wall. There are also tons of cameras and sensors, and they even hire guards just for the parking lot. I don't see how anyone could steal a car from there."

I see.

We had to determine if a car had been stolen, so that information was worth keeping in mind.

"But do the workers live nearby? Their cars might be targeted at home."

"No, no. That would never happen," flatly denied the man. He laughed and continued, "Four Mountains…Oh, that's the name of the basin between the mountains, by the way. Anyway, Four Mountains has no civilization aside from the factory."

"What?"

"I hear there was a small village a few decades back, but it's been abandoned. In fact, the factory would be in trouble otherwise."

"What do you mean?" I asked while frantically trying to maintain the expression of a police officer while pushing back the mystery freak who was excitedly trying to raise her hand.

The man replied, "I don't know the details myself, but it seems you need clean water and air to create the precision circuits that are thinner than a hair. The water is especially important. Apparently, it's more profitable to give the most delicious water to machines rather than people. Any chaotic development would dirty the water."

"So…"

"The Four Mountains area has been almost entirely bought up by a single corporation. It's just a giant area of nothing though, so some kids come in as a test of courage sometimes. …Even this elevated highway was built by 'borrowing' the corporation's land. On paper, it's a private road."

"Eh? But it's a highway. Is that even possible?"

"Highways don't belong to the country. Even we're becoming privatized, so we're a normal corporation just like with trains. That means we can make business deals with other corporations. It might

have just barely been allowed, but there was no other place to bring the tunnels through."

In other words…

Whether they would ever do so or not, they had the option of cutting off one of the highways that acted as Japan's arteries. All the factory had to do was make an announcement saying the road was closed for the next three days or something like that. And this was a junction that stretched in four different directions, leading to different areas across the country. That alone showed how much influence a corporation could have over the country.

"Mister, does that mean everyone who works in the factory drives over the mountains to get to work?"

"Hm? Hmm?"

The middle-aged man fell silent for a moment.

I thought he might have been confused by the supposed runaway girl asking him a question, but it seemed that was not the case.

He lowered his voice before speaking.

"No, it seems about half of the workers live in the dorms on the factory grounds."

"Half? Didn't you say there are more than 8000 in all?"

"It isn't that surprising. Remember the government's new…what was it? The business-oriented low income assistance and favorable treatment system? I think it had to do with providing support related to corporate taxes. Anyway, as I said, the Four Mountains area was bought up for the water and air. The dorms are probably kept as spotlessly clean as the factory. At any rate, there's no chance of a car being stolen from there."

Once the man finished, I politely thanked him and finally brought the rental car toward the exit.

Surprisingly, the sign had only one arrow and it pointed toward the semiconductor factory. Not only was there no other landmark, but it seemed there weren't even any other roads.

I stopped the car in the space at the exit prepared for large trucks to

check on their tire chains or freight. It was time we discussed what to do next.

The mystery freak had a curious look on her face.

“I’ve heard of bayside industrial complexes having the final train stop head to their factory. Only those with employee IDs can get through the ticket gate.”

“Yes, but did you see the name of the factory?”

“Kuroyama Electronics Group – Four Mountains Precision Semiconductor Factory.”

We exchanged a glance

The mystery freak did not look all that surprised, so she had probably known from the beginning. She had likely discovered it while investigating the legend of Zenmetsu Village. I did not know if the legend surrounding that abandoned village was true, but just because I was a police officer did not mean I would search through the database for information on cases unrelated to the ones I was working on.

“The incident Hasebe Michio was suspected in was at the home of Kuroyama Electronics Group’s president, right?”

“Now then, now then. Is this a coincidence or is there a reason behind it?”

I decided to drive over toward the factory in question. The horrible fog was bad enough and then nothing besides the asphalt road was maintained. The entire area was covered by a thick forest. This was nothing simple like a hedge. It was a complete wall of greenery. It was so thick I felt forcing my way through it would leave my entire body scraped up. This sight told me just how much human interference there was in what we commonly thought of as “nature”.

You often heard the phrase “humans are a part of earth’s nature”, but that did not mean humans were kind to the earth and it did not mean nature would unconditionally accept us. To a naked human with no fangs or fur, untouched nature was actually a difficult environment to live in.

“Is this the factory?”

“It’s just a wall, so it’s hard to say.”

Due to the fog, no structure was visible without approaching quite close. A giant wall over five meters tall suddenly appeared alongside the road as we drove along. It was primarily made of thick concrete and the very top had barbed wire installed. Needless to say, it had cameras and sensors as well.

The wall seemed to continue forever.

In all seriousness, we continued for over a kilometer and saw no sign of a gate.

“Is this a military facility or something…?”

“It looks like a prison,” I said in annoyance

This semiconductor factory supported the technology of Intellectual Villages and received support of its own from the government.

I can understand being more sensitive than average about having your tech leak out, but is it really necessary to take it this far?

As we continued on even longer, we finally came across what looked like a gate. The road in front of it spread out like a bus roundabout, so it was likely the materials shipment entrance rather than the front entrance.

This entrance was not a gate with a bar that lowered across it like at a coin-operated parking lot.

It had a giant double-door gate with metal bars and a row of electrically-operated spikes was located on the ground. Even if a giant truck crashed into it at full speed, I doubted it would break.

“…”

A man in workwear sat in the reception box that was as small as a storage shed. He was watching us expressionlessly.

I continued on at low speed and passed by the gate.

“…There really is nothing. Attacking a police box and stealing a police car would be easier than stealing a car from here.”

“But what does that mean?” The mystery freak tilted her head in the passenger seat. “The prisoner transport vehicle was toppled over

on the highway and Hasebe Michio had disappeared. But this is no place to steal a car."

"Whoever caused him to disappear might have had another scenario in mind."

"Possibly, but isn't the entire premise a bit odd?" The mystery freak raised her index finger. "Let's say someone wants Hasebe Michio gone and they have been carefully putting together a plan for this day. If they had thought this through so carefully, would they really attack here? If they attacked somewhere other than Four Mountains Junction – a normal road off the highway perhaps – they would have had more options."

It was not logical.

That meant it was not the work of a professional.

But what did that mean?

The most likely unprofessional possibility was…

"Are you saying the police did not intend to attack here if they intended to attack at all? So was it Hasebe Michio who initiated the escape?"

"Hasebe might have intentionally stopped the prisoner transport vehicle or it might have started with a true accident, but the possibility is there."

"But why? If he did nothing, the odds were really good his request for a retrial would have gone through and he would have been found not guilty. Escaping here will send him back to prison where the death penalty awaits."

"I don't know." The mystery freak sighed. "What if the police really did intend to eliminate him and he realized it? If he thought he was going to be killed if he did nothing, he might try to escape from the police."

There were ways of getting down from the highway without passing through the tollgate.

Some of the pillars supporting the highway had staircases installed. They were used for high-speed bus rest stops and emergency evacuation. If he climbed down one of them, he could hide on the

surface without anyone realizing it.

But…

Even if Hasebe had escaped the prisoner transport vehicle and made his way to the ground, what would he do then? He would have given the police the justification to shoot him as an escaped death-row inmate and then hidden himself in a thick forest *with no witnesses.*

Wouldn't he want to quickly obtain a means of transportation and escape far away no matter how risky that might be?

"But," began the mystery freak.

She was changing the subject.

She was switching over.

"All of our speculation is based on the assumption that Hasebe Michio is completely innocent and the police are desperate to eliminate him."

"Wait. You can't mean…"

"So." She grinned. The mystery freak spoke with the grin of a demon that toyed with people's lives. "Let's talk about a simple possibility. What if there is some reason why a retrial would be a problem for Hasebe Michio? If he knew he could not win the retrial, isn't it entirely possible he would have desperately used this chance to escape while being transported?"

Part 11 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The scraping continued.

That noise from the outside wall of the run-down shack approached the single exit.

In that instant, Madoka and I did not head for the door. We instead moved toward the opposite wall.

That wall had never been anything more than thin plywood with galvanized sheet iron for sturdiness and waterproofing. After decades of absorbing moisture, the wood had deteriorated and the iron was so rusted its original color had disappeared. The wall looked like it would break if we so much as touched it.

You could no longer even call it a wall.

“Ora!!” I shouted as I kicked the wall while putting my weight into the blow.

It felt more like kicking wet cardboard than wood. It more tore than broke and a large hole opened in the wall. I first let Madoka pass through before escaping the shack after her.

The previously calm scraping noise suddenly changed.

I still held the gas cylinder the size of a 500 milliliter drink bottle that I had removed from the portable stove, so I threw it back through the hole I had created.

“I hope you’re blown to smithereens!!” I shouted.

I heard a sound like grass being trod on from the other side of the small building. The attacker may have frantically jumped out of the way or gotten down on the ground.

Either way, the idiot had judged wrong.

I had thrown that cylinder in, but I had no idea how to ignite it.

It had been a bluff.

And meanwhile…

“Run, Madoka!”

“Please spare me any more trouble that can’t be resolved with money!!” shouted Madoka as I grabbed her arm and began to run.

We did not know who this enemy was, what they were armed with, or how many of them there were in all. The legend said the murders were primarily carried out with farm tools such as pitchforks and hoes, but nothing said this attacker had to remain faithful to that. It was possible they even had a hunting shotgun to use when no one was watching.

The one piece of luck was the thick fog surrounding us.

That obstacle prevented anyone from seeing more than a few meters ahead, so projectile accuracy would drop dramatically. Or so I assumed. At any rate, we needed to run as far away as we could so this enemy could not reach within “a few meters” of us. That would be better than sneaking around in search of some kind of shield.

The fog made it difficult to tell where we were or how far we had gone, but I felt as if my hearing had grown sharper in exchange for the poor visibility.

Madoka tried to look back, but I tugged on her arm to stop her.

We ran.

“Hey, Shinobu-kun. I hear footsteps following us!”

“So? That’s no reason for us to stop!!”

We passed by a few of those storage shed-like cabins and made our way outside the village. The sound of footsteps through the grass continued approaching behind us.

I was afraid the tall underbrush and rotting trees would block our path once we left the village, but fortunately only the remnants of the dead and rotten grass remained. There was nothing in our way.

Of course, that also meant there was nothing to protect us from any projectiles.

The importance of the fog only continued to grow.

If this person was armed with a shotgun or crossbow, we could be killed in one shot once the person made it close enough to see us.

“Sh-Shinobu-kun!”

“What!?”

“I…I can’t. I’m wearing leather shoes. I can’t run anymore.”

“I’m wearing leather shoes, too!!”

You’re a health fanatic who even pays attention to what water you drink, so why is your physical ability lower than average? Can you even call that being a health fanatic?

I pulled on Madoka’s arm as her feet threatened to get tangled up beneath her and half-forcibly made her continue running. Either that proved effective or our pursuer’s sense of direction was thrown off by the thick fog because the sound of footsteps behind us gradually seemed to grow quieter.

We were gaining distance.

We might be able to escape.

And with that thought in mind, something suddenly appeared before my eyes.

It seemed to split through the white fog.

“…Eh?” said Madoka in confusion.

I also came to a stop despite the situation.

What we saw was something that should not have been there.

It was a run-down shack that looked more like a storage shed than a house.

This was the abandoned village we had supposedly just left.

It was impossible.

This should not have happened.

Madoka and I had run straight forward without worrying about the consequences. Our route might have curved slightly, but there was absolutely no way we could have made a full U-turn back to our original location.

And yet…

That village was indeed blocking our path ahead.

Zenmetsu Village.

Thirty years ago, a single serial killer had taken the lives of every single villager.

“What happened?” I said out loud. “We ran straight away from there! Why is the village right here in front of us!?”

The footsteps of our pursuer once more began growing louder through the fog behind us.

But I ignored that direct threat as the legend Madoka had mentioned replayed in the back of my mind.

Supposedly, groups using Zenmetsu Village for a test of courage would end up dragged into the incident. When they frantically fled the village, it would pursue them by circling around ahead of them and swallow them up.

Part 12 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

With the extent that large-scale factory went to prevent information on their technology to escape, I doubted I could acquire much information on the goings on inside with by chatting with the guards. The guards would have been trained in that regard.

Whether Hasebe Michio had escaped of his own volition or he had been abducted by someone, we did not have much time left.

We could not remain long in a location with little chance of acquiring any information.

But…

“Do you have any other ideas where Hasebe might have gone after disappearing on the highway? There’s nothing here but the semiconductor factory.”

Yes.

Where else could we go?

Hasebe had to be somewhere, but we had no clues to pursue him with.

“Even in this fog, a man in a neon orange prisoner uniform would stand out walking along the highway. There are also plenty of cameras and sensors installed to detect speeding and traffic jams.”

“So is he in Zenmetsu Village?” The mystery freak in the passenger seat was doing something with her smartphone that had no signal. “But even if it isn’t maintained, this entire basin area is the private property of Kuroyama Electronics Group, right? And the semiconductor factory needs clean water, so they can’t have industrial waste dumped here. Don’t you think there must be a network of cameras and sensors running throughout this desolate forest even if it doesn’t look like it?”

It was certainly a possibility.

However…

“Do you have any actual evidence?”

“This.” Enbi lightly shook her smartphone. “We suddenly lost our cell phone signal once we left the tunnel. I had thought it was due to the area being undeveloped, but if the entire area is the private property of a corporation, another possibility comes to mind.”

“…Artificial jamming?”

“That’s a large factory with 8000 people working in it. For that and for the careful management of production amounts to match the fluctuation in currency rates, a high-speed internet connection is a necessity. They can’t do their job without phones and the internet. Even if no television or radio signals had originally reached this place, they would have provided it with a proper internet environment when the factory was built. After all, this is a corporation large enough to prepare a highway just for the factory. There’s no way they would overlook just this one aspect.”

“So is this a means of keeping technical information from leaking out?”

“I don’t know if they would set up jammers over such a wide area just for that, though.”

“What is the legality of this?”

“Laws related to electro-magnetic signals can be ignored to a certain extent on private property. Company conference rooms and rooms in high class restaurants often have jammers to prevent bugging. The given reason is to ban the use of cell phones, though.”

The land contained nothing other than the factory. While tens of thousands of cars would cross the highway each day, they only crossed the junction from one tunnel to another. They would see some interference with their cell phone signal while surrounded by the mountains, but the signal would recover upon exiting the other tunnel. No one would bother investigating it too much.

The highway was even referred to as a private road. The cables for the emergency landline phones on the highway might have been cut as well.

“So the factory secretly constructed a high-speed wired connection that only they can use and have cut off all other forms of communication?”

“That’s what…I think anyway.” Enbi may have suggested the idea,

but she sounded doubtful. “But don’t the delivery companies contact the distribution center by phone? There are also services that use a GPS in the package to check its status over the internet. If Kuroyama Electronics Group has cut all of that off of their own discretion, I think someone might complain.”

They had bought up the entire basin between the mountains and surrounded their factory with tall and thick walls. On top of that, we suspected they were using jammers to create electromagnetic interference and had cameras and sensors set up to search for intruders.

That gave it all an imposing atmosphere.

It was as if they had carefully cut out their own independent territory.

But at the same time…

“If they have a surveillance network like that, the factory’s guard room might have data concerning Hasebe Michio. If he didn’t go to the factory, he must either be on the highway or in the forest.”

“But I doubt they would agree to cooperate. Having security on your personal property is perfectly legal, but it still isn’t something they want to reveal if they don’t have to. Unlike the West, Japan is sensitive to cameras and a surveillance culture. Also…”

The mystery freak trailed off.

This bothered me.

It bothered me a lot.

After all, that girl was constantly surrounded by death. Hearing her trail off gave me the unpleasant feeling that this was something that knowledge or ignorance of would affect my continued survival.

“What is it, mystery freak?”

“Well…” The mystery freak sighed. “If my guesses here are right, doesn’t that mean this is a small independent territory created by Kuroyama Electronics Group? There are 8000 workers at the factory and even the people working for the highway insist it’s a private road. …And Hasebe Michio was given the death penalty for attacking the house of Kuroyama Electronics Group’s president.”

“Wait a second. You don’t mean…?”

“We had the Hasebe theory and the police theory, but now another theory has shown itself, detective.”

A close look at Enbi’s smile showed it was a bit stiff.

She may have been interested in people’s deaths, but she of course did not want to be directly involved in it herself.

“What if someone from the Kuroyama Electronics Group took action to take revenge for their leader? What if someone could not allow this prisoner to be found innocent in a retrial? Why did Hasebe disappear in this area that is both difficult to escape from and difficult to camouflage an escape in? Because this is Kuroyama’s independent territory. Because this is the area along his transportation route that Kuroyama had the most power in. What if that is the answer?”

The story suddenly grew a lot more suspicious.

In the truly worst case, it was possible all 8000 people working in the factory were the criminals behind it. No, it went beyond that. Four Mountains Junction was a private road owned by Kuroyama Electronics Group. If they closed the road, it would not only affect the highway workers but also slow the distribution of goods throughout the country. I could not even guess how far the effects would spread.

There were plenty of ways around this junction: sea, air, rail, and normal roads. However, the time and cost of taking those routes could not be underestimated. There was a good reason the highways were the country’s primary distribution route. In the economic world, there was always a reason an alternate path was not taken.

In other words, this “private road” was a free pass that used the Japanese economy as a shield.

This went well beyond a conspiracy by the higher ups and old members of the regional police.

It was possible help in large or in small had been taken from people across Japan and possibly even foreign corporations in order to eliminate a single man.

“Wait, wait, wait. This reminds me of Zashou Island. Are you saying common sense itself is being distorted here?”

“This land has 8000 soldiers and a thick forest with no one watching,” muttered the mystery freak in shock. “Whether they are judging the criminal who killed their president or torturing him for information about the murder, doesn’t the Kuroyama Electronics Group theory seem the most dangerous and yet most likely option?”

We had no proof that the corporation had abducted Hasebe Michio.

Even if any existed, it would likely be eliminated as soon as possible.

But nothing could be worse than forcibly investigating Kuroyama Electronics Group and finding nothing. Not only did I not have a warrant, but I had no authority as a police officer because this was not within my jurisdiction. If I climbed the wall and snuck into the factory, I would be guilty of illegal entry. I could even be used as grounds for forcing through the Advanced Technology Disclosure Prevention Bill that had been in the news lately. That would bring permanent shame on me as a police officer who supposedly protected the public order.

On top of that, this was a small independent territory of a single corporation.

If an executive was in a bad mood, it was possible the police would never be called and I would be buried in the forest at the hands of those 8000 soldiers. Four Mountains had a powerful enough foundation to continue on with their peaceful lives even after doing that.

They were extremely suspicious, but they were too big to carelessly try anything against them.

“Now then, now then.” Enbi the mystery freak asked a question from the passenger seat. “What should we do now, detective?”

Part 13 (Jinnai Shinobu)

We had run across a mystery person in the remains of Zenmetsu Village, run as quickly as we could from the village, and then found the village waiting for us up ahead.

What were we to make of this situation?

“Shinobu-kun, we can’t stay still! The footsteps are getting closer!!”

“Dammit!!”

For the moment, we focused on running away from the obvious threat. But was that truly the correct answer? It seemed impossible, but I was afraid we would run and run and run until we found the owner of those footsteps waiting ahead of us as if we had circled around the entire globe.

I ran as if parting the thick fog while still holding Madoka’s hand.

We passed by the tilted silhouette of the shack that had been abandoned for decades.

…?

Wait a second. Is this…?

“Shinobu-kun!!”

That sudden shout was accompanied by a shove.

I rolled along the wet dead grass. But I did not have time to cry out in protest.

As if slicing through the fog, the pointed end of a rusted farm tool stabbed out.

It was a pitchfork. It was one of those ridiculously large fork-like tools used to carry hay. The handle was meant to be held with both hands, so it was quite long. Specifically, it was about 150 centimeters long. The fork portion made it look more like a strange spear than a farm tool. It looked large enough to kill a human if it stabbed through anywhere on the torso.

Plus, the end was fully covered in rust and the tines were of

different lengths because some had broken off partway.

I was certain I would get some strange infection if I was stabbed with it.

I heard some odd breathing that almost sounded like a poorly-made whistle.

The pitchfork was pulled back slowly. The outstretched spring was being contracted in preparation for the next attack.

The tip shook.

It moved from where I had been and turned toward Madoka.

“You bastard!!”

While still lying on the dead grass, I searched around with my right hand. My fingertips found something hard and I threw the rock toward the attacker.

It did not hit. I heard a solid sound as if it had struck a distant wall.

But it had expressed my hostility.

The pitchfork’s aim clearly changed. It turned toward me.

I had no intention of doing nothing as I was attacked. By that time, I had forced myself to a standing position with a rolling motion.

“Shinobu-kun! What are you doing!?”

“Shut up! You go hide!!” I shouted.

Now that I had the attacker’s attention, I turned my back. I wanted any weapon I could find, so I ran toward a nearby shack.

At first, I had thought the exact same village had circled around in front of us.

But that was not the case.

It had been difficult to tell through the thick fog, but a closer look had shown the details were completely different. Basically, a few small villages of four or five houses were located here and there. We had run straight and travelled from Village A to Village B.

Once you knew how it worked, there was nothing to be afraid of. In fact, I could even take advantage of it.

At any rate, I needed a weapon. I needed something to put me on even footing with that psycho. The attacker had to have acquired that weapon here in Zenmetsu Village. The small cabins had no room to store huge farm tools, and if they had the money or materials to build a storehouse, they would have upgraded their homes.

In that case, the tools would most likely be found leaning up against the outer walls.

“Ah! Found one!!”

A worn-down shovel was leaning up against the wall. It had half-fused with the wall that had grown dark with all the moisture it had absorbed over the years.

Just as I reached out for it, I heard footsteps approaching from behind.

I grabbed the shovel with all my strength and did not hesitate to swing it horizontally using the motion of turning around to face the attacker.

“…?”

I felt something slip off.

The triangular metal portion made to dig holes had flown right off the handle!

With a sharp whistling breath, the giant fork-like tool attacked from beyond the fog. Instead of another stabbing attack, it was swung down like someone trying to split a watermelon.

I immediately tried to block it by holding the shovel handle up horizontally, but it didn’t help.

The handle was so rotten that it was no stronger than wet cardboard, so it broke all too easily. A heavy impact came down on the top of my head.

“Bh..gbhah!?”

The strike sent me crumbling straight down to the ground. The

attacker's pitchfork rotated around. This time, the worn down tip was being stabbed straight toward my face!

But then…

A change came over the attacker who was about to stab down the pitchfork as if leaning down on it.

With a splat, something like wet seaweed fell from the dirty cabin's roof and covered about half of the attacker's head.

However, this was no place to find seaweed.

This seaweed-like substance was writhing around oddly even though no wind was blowing through the area.

It was a bundle of snakes.

Over ten snakes about as thick as a little finger had fallen atop the attacker's head.

"…!!!???"

A biological sense of disgust that had nothing to do with reason ran down my spine.

But the same had to apply to the attacker.

He frantically tried to brush away the group of snakes that had fallen on his head. In his haste, he let go of the pitchfork with one hand.

His focus wavered.

The tip of the pitchfork wavered.

"Go to hell!!"

I threw one broken half of the shovel handle toward the attacker's face. I hit this time, but it did not seem to do much damage.

All I needed was to buy some time.

I frantically stood up and strengthened my grip on the other half of the broken handle.

I had no time for hesitation.

The handle had been rotting to pieces already. I could not stop the attacker by striking with or throwing it.

And so…

I held it with both hands as if it was a knife and immediately stabbed the jagged broken edge of the handle into the attacker's thigh.

"Gyah!?"

I felt a soft sensation.

I did not want to think about whether that came from the rotting handle or the attacker's leg.

"Gh, ghh! Ah, ah, ah!?"

The attacker fell to the side. The small snakes covering the attacker's head scattered in an instant as if slipping in amongst the dead grass. The sight of something stabbing into his leg must have been a shock to the attacker because he used both hands in an attempt to pull the remains of the handle out of his leg.

Yes, he used both of the hands he had been using to hold the pitchfork.

"You bastard…"

When the attacker heard my voice, he seemed to finally catch on to the situation. He realized I had swiped the giant pitchfork he had let go of.

And I was swinging that pitchfork up above my head.

"If you're!! Gonna try to stab people with this!! Don't get so upset!! When someone!! Attacks you back!!!!!!"

I swung it down again and again.

The farm tool was designed like a giant fork, so it would not stab into someone unless thrust straight at them. However, I was essentially beating him with a blunt weapon similar to a wooden sword with a metal weight on the end. It could easily break a bone.

I was able to rationally analyze that in my head, but I could not stop my arms.

I could feel something boiling up in my mind.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!!
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

I let out a great roar.

I could not stand anything. I could not stand how the attacker was curling up and covering his head with his hands as if he was the victim. He had been doing whatever he wanted a minute ago, but this was how he acted once someone attacked back. I decided to continue beating him until his true nature had been fully revealed.

“Shinobu-kun?”

I then heard a familiar voice.

Madoka had come by to check on me. She seemed to be peeking around a corner of the shack.

“Shinobu-kun, wait!! You can’t go any further than this! You’ll kill him!!”

“Pant!! Pant!!”

My hands were trembling. I was breathing heavily. I stopped swinging down the pitchfork, but my fingers were so stiff with tension and anger that they refused to obey my commands. As if I was waiting for a numb leg to recover, I would have to wait a moment before being able to let go of the pitchfork.

The attacker was curled up in the fetal position.

The person who lay trembling on the ground was a man in his forties or fifties with a beard covering his entire face and wearing clothes that looked like dirty old rags.

“Who are you?”

Pain returned to my head as if it had only just now recalled being struck.

As Madoka helped support my shaky body, I shouted toward the attacker lying on the dead grass.

“Who the hell are you!?”

Part 14 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

More than twenty years before, Hasebe Michio had been sentenced to death for the crime of killing the president of Kuroyama Electronics Group, but he had disappeared during transport while a retrial was being requested.

He had vanished in the vast private property of the Kuroyama Electronics Group. Although no evidence had been found, it was possible the Kuroyama Electronics Group had abducted him.

The key to this mystery was the surveillance recordings of the security company.

According to the mystery freak's speculation, the communications interference in the Four Mountains basin came from jamming devices. She also theorized a large number of wired cameras and sensors had been secretly installed. If that was true, it could be an important clue to Hasebe Michio's location whether Kuroyama was guilty or not.

Even if the Kuroyama Electronics Group had nothing to do with his disappearance, it was possible the higher ups and old members of the regional police saw him as a nuisance as well. Either way, every second counted.

"But, detective, this is the Kuroyama Electronics Group's independent territory. You have no authority right now, so I doubt anyone will hand over the video recordings if you ask."

"They have absolute control here, but this independent territory is not all that large," I said while driving the rental car down the road we had come on. "Seventy percent of the security companies in the country that specialize in corporations have either their headquarters or Japanese branch office in Tokyo."

"I see. You think you can get the recordings if you go after the Tokyo headquarters? And fortunately, your Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department badge has unrivalled power when used in Tokyo."

"Even if the Kuroyama Electronics Group has the local guards on their side, they might not have influence over everyone at the distant headquarters. And the guards will have no choice but to

obey the regulations of their company. The video footage will be sent to a server at their headquarters for storage."

"That means we just need to know exactly what security company to check. But everyone at the gate wore a factory uniform with nothing indicating the security company."

"We need to check the cable that the footage is sent over. Different companies have different standard infrastructure they use. If I have the desk group back at the Metropolitan Police Department check which companies use which cables, we can track them down."

"Do we have to search that entire thick forest?"

"Are you testing me?" I gave a scornful laugh. "As the name suggests, Four Mountains is surrounded by mountains. They'll use the tunnels to pass the cables through. The cables will be buried along the shortest route between the factory and the nearest tunnel. That would be the one through Seiryuu Mountain."

We naturally moved from the Four Mountains' center junction as we moved toward the location connecting the outer tunnel and the semiconductor factory.

After a while, the distance from the factory caused the menace of nature to suddenly close in on us.

"…The road is disappearing."

"Let's get out and deal with this quickly. The only people here are with Kuroyama, so nothing good will come of being found investigating the corporation."

I opened the driver's side door and the unpleasantly moist air quickly rushed in. It was fog, but it was not refreshingly cool. It was somehow hot, humid, and moist.

The mystery freak stepped out from the passenger seat, placed her hands on her hips, and looked out across the dried up and rotting forest.

"Wow, this is horrid. This forest is so thick I wouldn't be surprised to find a few inconvenient corpses."

"There's something wrong with you if corpses are the first thing a forest brings to mind."

“If we do find the model number for the cable, what do we do then? We can’t use our phones, but don’t tell me we will head all the way back to Tokyo.”

“The signal is only affected in this basin between the mountains. We only have to pass through the tunnel and leave Four Mountains to use our phones. I will report the situation to my coworkers and then we wait for information at a service area. Once we have a clue concerning Hasebe Michio, we can begin tracking him again.”

“I see. In that case, let’s use the tunnel through Genbu Heights! The moonlight service area has a pink ice cream that is supposed to grant love between the two who eat it together!!”

“That would be embarrassing to do with a lover, so why would you want to do it with a complete stranger? In fact, I’m still not sure why the two of us have been driving long distances together on the highway.”

“So you admit using the highway together like this has been a sign of our love!? In that case, I’m prepared to give you a fan service scene you will never forget!”

Saying anything would only have made it worse, so I ignored her and made my way into the forest.

As I headed deeper while stepping forcefully on the ground, I noticed something odd not even 10 meters in. I crouched down and moved a rotting black object at my feet that might have been humus or organic waste. And then I found it.

Something like a concrete ditch cut across. However, it was not meant for rainwater like a ditch in a residential area. It was a concrete covering prepared to prevent wild animals from digging up or biting through the exposed cables.

The cover was divided into blocked sections about 50 centimeters across. I grabbed one of them and forced it up.

Spider webs and earth had made their way inside, but I spotted a cable as thick as my thumb inside. It was covered in black plastic that had the same string of numbers printed at set intervals.

I took my cell phone from my suit pocket and photographed the cable.

“That should do it. Hey, mystery freak, I have the information we needed. Let’s get back to the car. If we pass through the tunnel and stop at the nearest service area…”

I trailed off because something seemed odd.

The mystery freak was not responding.

I turned around and found only the dense forest and thick fog. Enbi had been causing so much noise before, but she was completely gone. I could not even hear her voice.

“Hey…?”

Is she messing around and trying to surprise me?

With that silly thought in mind, I glanced around.

And then…

A dull impact suddenly ran through the bridge of my nose.

“Bah…!?”

My vision flashed white. All strength left my knees and I crumbled to the ground.

Someone…hit me? And on the nose…? They were right in front of me!? When and how did they get that close? I didn’t even see their face!!

Footsteps through the underbrush circled around.

They circled around behind me.

A slender arm wrapped around my neck from behind. Vise-like strength began strangling me. The flow of blood was cut off more than the flow of air and an intense heat swelled up in my head. From the soft sensation on my back, I could just barely surmise this attacker was female, but that was all the information I had.

My vision spun around.

This was a sign of my thoughts and consciousness leaving due to the lack of blood to my head.

And just before I fully lost consciousness…

“Oh, c’mon. Pass out already. Or are you enjoying my breasts?”

I heard a familiar abusive voice in my ear.

Hishigami Mai… What are…you doing here?

Part 15 (Hishigami Mai)

Honestly.

Searching for Hasebe Michio who had disappeared from the highway? That incident I had picked up over the police radio was likely what they were here for, but Kuroyama Electronics Group had nothing to do with that. I had my own annoying issues to deal with. I couldn't have them messing it all up with their amateurish investigation.

I threw the detective and my little sister in their rental car while they took a carefree nap. For an instant, I seriously considered stripping them both naked and positioning them in an embrace, but I stopped myself at the last second. I was on a job, so it was no time to be having fun.

Instead, I left a memo telling them Kuroyama Electronics Group was the wrong direction and they needed to look into Youkai if they wanted to find Hasebe. I of course added a note that I would physically punish them if they did not burn the memo in the car's ashtray after reading it.

A dull electronic tone sounded.

It came from the radio I had been given by the semiconductor factory. It used a band that could slip through the jamming.

"Hello, hello."

"Do you get it now that you've seen for yourself? No obvious footprints have been left. That's the problem."

The voice belonged to an elderly man who could easily be described as "stern", but he seemed to have some malice following him around. He was like a diligent prisoner who would maintain the guillotine meant to be used on him. …But given the nature of the factory, that might have been more than just a metaphor.

"If you understand, return to the factory. We have mountains of troublesome issues to take care of."

"Understood. I'll be right back."

I had frantically made up an excuse to leave the factory and ensure my sister and the detective did not step on any strange landmines, so I couldn't exactly argue. And it was true we didn't have much time.

I sat in the driver's seat of a small Kuroyama Electronics Group company car. I simply could not get used to electric cars. Without the roar of the engine, I could sometimes forget just how fast I was driving.

However, I did like the beckoning cat bottle cap dolls lined up on the dashboard.

How many of those are there again?

"U-um," began the small dog sitting obediently in the passenger seat.

Technically, he was a harmless canine Youkai called a Sunekosuri.

"Should you have really left those people like that?"

"I gave them a chance. In a case needing my involvement, this is almost a miracle. If they continue their misguided attack on Kuroyama despite my kindness, there's no saving them. I need to focus on my own job."

"B-but wasn't one of them your sister?"

"Try not to bring that up. The situation is a bit unique when it comes to Hishigami women. Well, just think of my abandoning her as being a form of trust."

I drove along in the electric car for a while longer before speaking once more.

"Sunekosuri, how are you faring?"

"F-fine. I have gotten a bit used to it, but…ugh. This should be a rural area…so why do I feel so bad?"

"This is the opposite of a carefully maintained Intellectual Village. This is made for machines. It's disguised as natural, but it is actually filled with artificial aspects. It's a tough environment for a Youkai like you."

I arrived at the main entrance to the semiconductor factory. I

showed the guard my temporary guest ID and slowly drove the car inside the wall.

The atmosphere suddenly changed.

Anyone who saw the inside would likely notice a certain fact. The exceptionally tall outer wall and the barbed wire were not merely meant to stop industrial spies from getting in.

The fog, the air, and everything else were trapped inside this space.

Yes. All of that equipment was also used *to keep anyone from escaping.*

“As you know,” said the elderly man over the radio as I brought the car around to the parking lot. “This looks like a large scale semiconductor factory and it does in fact create and ship out goods, but its true purpose lies elsewhere. This is a facility to imprison anyone who commits a serious breach of the corporation’s trust. If someone commits an act of industrial espionage by bringing internal documents out, they will be transferred here.”

A breach of trust and industrial espionage, hm?

Does that also apply to employees who recommend making certain internal documents public or the victims of products that accidentally catch fire?

“I have heard it referred to as the corporate prison, but what is its official name?” I asked.

“It has no name. After all, it would be a problem if any records if it remained. That is what kind of place this is. We have the equipment needed and we can even overwrite common sense here.”

“Who would have ever thought the nation’s leading large scale factory with over 8000 employees is actually mostly automated and can run with only a few SEs?”

“The technology is not all that rare. Factories only remain manned to protect employment and to prevent the few workers actually needed from going insane from loneliness.”

In other words, the 8000 workers were completely unnecessary.

Not only did they not touch the production factory’s equipment, but

they were not even allowed in the same building.

So…

“The facility is made up of 5000 foolish prisoners and 3000 jailers including you,” said the man. “No information can be allowed out and a prisoner escaping is out of the question. The prisoners here will die here. No other path is allowed for them.”

I see. I see.

However, the cameras and sensors set up throughout the forest seemed to have a different meaning than the high walls and barbed wire. What were they for? They seemed less like a distribution of neatly optimized security and more like they were needlessly setting them up wherever they could. It was as if they could not find something they wanted to find.

I grabbed the radio and opened the car door.

The Sunekosuri hopped out through my door and onto the parking lot.

As I stood on the asphalt, I slammed the door shut and spoke into the radio.

“But you say the prisoners and jailers vanished into thin air at some point.”

Simply put, that was the circumstances surrounding the corporate prison.

With the use of the facility’s “abilities”, capturing Hasebe Michio who the detective and my sister were pursuing might indeed have been simple.

However, we were caught up in our own dangerous problem, so we had more important things to do.

As I walked from the parking lot to a giant structure of the factory, the elderly man and I continued to speak.

“Everyone disappeared leaving just a few prisoners and jailers behind,” he said. “I thought it was a mass jailbreak with most of the jailers taken hostage…but it is just too thorough. Also, there is no sign of the locks being broken or anything like that. It is unclear if

they were made to vanish by someone else or if they made themselves vanish."

"I see. So you are desperate for a solution."

"This corporate prison is strong. Even if the escaped prisoners testify on the public stage, Kuroyama Electronics Group will not go under. However, crushing even the slightest risk is the best option."

That was not surprising. If you included even the foreign affiliated companies, this was a corporation connected to over 150 thousand people. Any illegal operations they were involved in would be assisted by expert groups, making the structure of it all quite complex.

But if 5000 prisoners escaped and 3000 jailers were sacrificed, that elderly man would not escape blame.

He appeared calm, but he would likely be thrown into the one of those prisoner cells if the situation was not quickly resolved.

And that was why someone like me had been called in.

I had used a fictional ID that only existed online to be mistaken for a "complaint handler" who worked for a company affiliated with Kuroyama and handled any dirty jobs.

"We do not have time to treat you like a guest even if you are a temporary worker. Do your job. Depending on what happens, it is entirely possible you will be thrown into one of these cells in the future. Do not screw this up."

The Sunekosuri at my feet looked up with a worried expression.

Wah hah hah! Are you lonely? Then feel free to rub up against my leg!!

"Then let's handle this in the standard way," I said. "We reveal what exactly occurred, determine who did it, compare that to the balance of power between different groups to guess at their motive, and finally track down where the missing people are."

"If they have left the facility, that alone is grounds for shooting them. We know how to handle the bodies, so you can leave the cleanup to us."

"Understood. By the way, you know what the most likely possibility

is, don't you?"

"A Youkai?"

I sighed at that immediate reply.

The young lady of Hyakki Yakou had requested that I investigate the circumstances surrounding Four Mountain's semiconductor factory because they were catching glimpses of something dangerous there.

But the situation I found made me want a bonus.

After all, Hasebe Michio's disappearance meant the problem went beyond the corporate prison.

Now then. What are the conditions behind this strange phenomenon and how far has it spread?

"Okay. I'll start by investigating from that end of things."

What a pain.

If I only needed evidence of a crime, I could just record this conversation and submit it. Why did the prisoners who are the biggest piece of evidence have to vanish into thin air!?

Part 16 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The villagers of the abandoned Zenmetsu Village were rumored to have been slaughtered. Someone there was still trying to harm intruders using farm tools such as a pitchfork.

The man must not have bathed in a long time because his hair and beard were unkempt and his skin was discolored from dark stains.

His clothes were so dirty their original color was impossible to determine and they were so tattered that I could not even imagine what kind of clothes they had originally been.

Who was he?

The man had been balled up after I assaulted him, but when I asked him that, he used his trembling jaw to somehow force out some words.

“…No. It wasn’t me.”

“Who are you?”

“I…I… I didn’t do it!! I didn’t do anything! That’s why I’m still running. I didn’t kill anyone!!”

“I’m asking who you are!!”

The man jumped in fright when I shouted at him with the stolen pitchfork in hand.

I had a feeling Madoka was looking at me with horribly, horribly cold eyes.

I understood why.

I had been chased around a strange village, struck hard on the head, and driven to the verge of death. Being released from that state seemed to be keeping me from controlling my emotions very well. It was like releasing a compressed spring.

On top of that, I now held the weapon I had been so afraid of. Even I could tell this was making me overly bold.

It was not surprising that she was annoyed by my actions.

But I could not let this chance slip by. I would not let myself be dropped into that abyss again.

“…Yokoeda Tadashi.”

“Why were you swinging this at us? What are you doing here? Are you the mass murderer from over 30 years ago or are you some psycho copycat camping here?”

“N-no!! It wasn’t me! I only live here! I’ve always lived in this village!!”

“Then what’s with this?”

I thrust the rusted tines of the pitchfork in front of Yokoeda’s nose and he turned his head as if to look away from something unpleasant.

“I-I needed it for self defense. Given the location, horrible people often come here as a test of courage or something. The worst ones are the drunk ones. I can’t rely on the police, so I have to drive them off myself. Come to think of it, what are you doing here?”

“Hey, mister,” cut in Madoka. “If you know this place is so dangerous, why are you still living here? The homeless are not meant to pick fruit and hunt boars. In fact, I think they can only survive in a city with a certain level of development.”

“…It’s necessary.” Yokoeda’s gaze moved from place to place again and again in order to escape everyone else’s gaze. “It’s necessary. I’m the final survivor of those born here. And staying here in Four Mountains will make them rush things. If that causes them to make a mistake…”

“Who do you mean by ‘them’?”

“The Kuroyama Electronics Group.” Yokoeda spoke that name quickly. It was as if he were spitting an unpleasant bug out of his mouth as soon as he could. “Don’t you find it suspicious? …It was after that incident. It all ended thirty years ago in a single night. And immediately after everyone was slaughtered, the Kuroyama Electronics Group moved in. The village was opposed to the semiconductor factory that would suck up so much of the underground water. And then that incident occurred that conveniently got rid of all their opposition.”

Madoka and I exchanged a glance.

She looked confused. My expression was probably similar.

Was he speaking of a truth no one was aware of?

Or was this nothing more than the ramblings of a lonely middle-aged man.

I could not determine which it was, but I could feel some strange sort of weight.

"…"

I tried to ask Madoka's opinion, but she was keeping a bit of distance from me. This eccentric beauty of a classmate was glancing over at me. Or more specifically, at the end of the giant pitchfork in my hands.

Well, it is dangerous.

I did not know what the man was getting at, but I felt it was best to let him speak if he wanted to.

He needed to vent.

After all…

I had the advantage because I had the weapon with the longest reach.

However, the man could make a desperate last-ditch attack. If he did that, I was not entirely sure I could stab this giant fork into him without hesitating.

If I succeeded, I would be a murderer.

If I failed, I could be killed by that middle-aged man.

In other words, either result would ruin me.

Yokoeda Tadashi continued speaking without realizing my thoughts.

"It was a hot summer day. I…no, everyone my age was talking about having a test of courage. We drew lots to see who would take the test and who would try to scare those taking the test. At first, I

thought that was what saved me. But they intentionally left me alive. I stood still in a daze for a while after it happened. The next thing I knew, people were saying I had killed everyone. That was the scenario. They killed them in such over-the-top ways with blood flying up to the ceilings to make it look like a crazy killer had done it and to rob my testimony of all credibility."

Madoka must have been thinking anyone who might turn violent was dangerous when there were no police or mediators available. She kept her distance from both Yokoeda Tadashi and me as she frowned and asked a question.

It seemed she was trying to create a safe zone by taking a neutral position.

"Hey. You say 'them', so was there more than one murderer?"

"How many people do you think were needed to surround and annihilate all of the villagers who fled in every direction? At the very least, I saw five or six men wearing masks, but I don't know who they were. That is why I'm staying here to worry Kuroyama Electronics Group. I'm staying right next to them."

At some point, I had withdrawn the pitchfork.

Yokoeda had also sat up on the dead grass and leaned his back against the wall of the shack.

"According to Kuroyama's scenario, I was supposed to be immediately captured and blamed for it all. But that didn't happen, so they quickly changed the outcome. Due to certain circumstances, we had lived a life cut off from the outside world in a village of only a few dozen people. No one would cause an uproar over the village's disappearance. Its disappearance was not a problem for anyone. …They bribed plenty of people to eliminate all information related to the village's existence. *The people there became a mere rumor.* After all, the village was never on any maps to begin with."

"What…? And what do you mean by 'certain circumstances'?"

The village's living standards seemed oddly low. It had no asphalt roads, no plumbing, and not even a well. No sign of any public services could be seen.

Even if satellites had not been used for standard public services thirty years before, there had to have been some major

“circumstances” for them to not have their name on the map.

Yokoeda remained silent.

It seemed he did not want to talk about that.

When he did speak, it was to forcibly change the subject.

“Despite supposedly destroying the village, one of the villagers is still alive. They would be in trouble if some unwanted information got out. That is why the Kuroyama Electronics Group is even now desperately searching for me. And I have made sure they are. That is why they have set up countless cameras and sensors across the area. They claim it is to ensure the water resources of their private property, though.”

Eh?

Kuroyama Electronics Group’s private property?

Cameras and sensors?

I could only frown at those terms he so readily used.

This area feels like a monstrous forest that’s either rotting or soggy. Does it really have a security network like that in it?

“(Shinobu-kun. I can’t tell if this is some great secret or a simple conspiracy theory,)” said Madoka in secretive mode.

I know you need to whisper right now, but don’t carelessly approach me, you damn beauty!!

“So I bring in from outside what I need to live and move between the small villages at irregular intervals. If I was only living as a fugitive, I could have gone overseas, but there has to be meaning in my staying here. The only remnants of that incident are here.”

…Is that really true?

If this really was the vast private property bought up by a single corporation, they would likely destroy everything that was a nuisance or inconvenient to them. If they crushed the village down to an empty lot, there would be no evidence left and no further investigation could be made. However, they had left the buildings intact with the bloodstains still inside. Was that a sign of their confidence? Were they saying no investigation could find anything?

If Yokoeda's story was true, Kuroyama Electronics Group might have been intentionally leaving some hope for him.

They were giving him a reason to remain fixated on this location. That way he would remain instead of fleeing overseas. They could then secretly capture him and eliminate him.

The worst part was that they did not even need to capture him.

Yokoeda held the only key yet he was wasting his time investigating in the wrong place and growing weaker all the while.

I could not decide whether I should point that out or not.

But then I heard the sound of the dead grass being trod on beyond the fog.

"…"

Madoka, Yokoeda Tadashi, and I all turned silently toward the sound.

The pure white veil cut off our vision as usual, so we could not see what was there.

"Hey, Madoka. Do you think it's the Love King or Nagisa?"

"Don't look for knowledge about our classmates from the lone beauty Madoka-chan."

Despite asking that, I also doubted this was anyone safe.

I gulped and spoke to Yokoeda Tadashi.

"Hey. Is there anyone here besides you?"

I had not turned toward the man as I asked, so I could only hear him gulp and then reply.

"No. There was no one…no one other than me. No, wait. It can't be!!"

We heard the sound again.

It was not coming from just one spot. As if someone was slowly approaching in a line, the sound of the dead grass filled one entire direction.

Was it a group?

“I-it’s Kuroyama,” said Yokoeda in a trembling voice. “Their troops are here!! I calculated my movements to slip through the gaps in their surveillance network, but what about you two? You two must have left a trail that led them to me!!”

“Hey, wait!!”

I did not have time to call out and stop him.

Yokoeda stood up with his back still pressed against the wall and then ran away. Madoka and I exchanged a glance. Her eyes were of course widened in surprise at this sudden occurrence

All the while, the noise drew closer.

“Wh-what should we do, Shinobu-kun!?”

“…”

Should we run? Where to? Should we oppose them? Oppose who?

Before I could gather my thoughts, the situation progressed.

I ignored Madoka as she tugged on the sleeve of my short sleeve shirt and looked blankly into the fog.

The source of the noise was approaching.

Something was coming this way.

Part 17 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

“Uuhh…”

I woke up to the sound of myself groaning and found myself in the rental car. For an instant, I thought the attack from before had been a dream, but it seemed reality was not that convenient.

I grimaced when I saw the memo sitting on the dashboard.

It said, “Kuroyama Electronics Group is the wrong direction and you need to look into Youkai if you want to find Hasebe.” I was not a handwriting fetishist who could tell who wrote it just by looking at the writing, but I could make a good guess from the note in the corner saying, “If you don’t burn this in the ashtray after reading it, I’ll punish you☆” I could only think of one person who lived in that old spy movie world.

That was when the mystery freak woke up in the passenger seat.

“Ah!? H-huh? You woke up before me, detective? That means you did all sorts of things to me in my sleep, doesn’t it!? But don’t worry! I made sure to bring a pregnancy test with me!”

She seemed to still be half asleep, so I held out the memo to wake her up.

Enbi grimaced when she saw the short text left by her sister.

“Wow, so she’s involved in this. Does that mean this is bad enough that she’s needed to resolve it?”

“This is clearly a sign telling us to quietly leave.”

I gave an annoyed sigh before pulling out the car’s ashtray as instructed. I balled up the memo and pressed the tip of the cigar lighter against it to light it.

“But she doesn’t understand at all. Leaving this note behind is all the more reason we can’t just leave!!”

“It’s possible she planned for this reaction, but knowing my sister, she wasn’t thinking at all.”

And so we began discussing the message Mai had left in the parked rental car.

“She said Hasebe’s disappearance was related to a Youkai.”

“So the people vanishing from the prisoner transport vehicle and police cars was related to a Youkai instead of any humans such as the regional police or Kuroyama Electronics Group? Was it a criminal Package?”

“But would that really be necessary? The police officers were transporting him and Kuroyama owns all this land, so they wouldn’t need help from a Youkai. They could have abducted Hasebe on their own.”

“Then it was someone other than them?”

“Someone other than…?”

I trailed off and fell silent.

There was only one possibility.

“Hasebe Michio himself?”

“Well, he was handcuffed, chained to his seat, and being watched. If he was going to escape, it would have been difficult using any normal method.”

“But he had no reason to escape. If he had obeyed his instructions, the request for a retrial would have gone through and he would have likely been found not guilty.”

“Maybe he suspected an assassin from the regional police or Kuroyama was coming, so he panicked and ran off. Maybe he decided he would not survive until his retrial.”

“Packages use the skills of hundreds of people to draw out the power of a Youkai in a useful way. Hasebe couldn’t have used one on his own and especially not without planning.”

“Then again,” the mystery freak raised her index finger, “We keep talking about Youkai, but we don’t even know what kind of Youkai was used. This area has more nature than anyone could ever want, but there’s no sense of any Youkai around.”

“I don’t like Youkai, so I’m thankful for that.”

The smell of smoke from burning the memo stung at my nose, so I used the air conditioning vent to drive it away.

“But it is odd that no Youkai has tried anything in a forest this big. Given the way Youkai react to me, I would have expected a transformed Kitsune or Tanuki to approach me.”

“Are there really no Youkai here?”

“Or,” I cut in. “Has the terrain of the Four Mountains area been modified to increase the influence of a single type of Youkai. That way only the Youkai someone wanted to build into their Package would be able to fully manifest its power.”

That was possible in this area.

Kuroyama Electronics Group possessed a vast amount of private property.

But if that was the case…

“This is bad… I thought this case was centered on Hasebe Michio, but the actual structure may be different.”

“Are you saying this was not an attempt to abduct Hasebe Michio? Are you saying a Package with some special effect just so happened to affect Hasebe?”

I turned the key in the rental car.

The engine turned on, I moved the shift lever, and stepped on the accelerator.

“We will never find an answer at this rate. Let’s leave Four Mountains for the moment. We need to pass through the tunnel and stop at a service area where we can use our phones.”

“Detective, are you going to pass that cable model number to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department?”

“That’s part of it, but I also want to know what kinds of Youkai live in the Four Mountains area. This Package is using some part of a Youkai’s nature. If we know what kind of Youkai that is, we might be able to determine how Hasebe disappeared and where he might be.”

Part 18 (Hishigami Mai)

Now then. Time to check on the semiconductor factory.

On the jailer side, the only people left other than me were two guards each from the main entrance and the materials shipment entrance as well as the elderly supervisor. That was a total of five.

On the prisoner side, only a teenage girl and an older woman who looked like she was being forced to perform hard labor in her fifties. That was a total of two.

With so few people, it was unbelievable that there had originally been 8000.

It was even more surprising that the factory continued to run without slowing.

The vast semiconductor factory known as a corporate prison was divided into a factory block and a dorm block. The dorm block was a complete decoy. The prisoners were actually contained in the prison block which was fully contained underground.

The supervisor named Itou gestured down the hallway with his chin.

“Do you want to take a peek?”

“Later, if I have a chance,” I said, gently turning down his offer.

There was something I had to do before going along with their cruelty.

Itou must have been more nervous than he let on because he sounded irritated as he continued speaking.

“I cannot believe you actually brought that Youkai here.”

The Sunekosuri jumped in fright, but I did not mind.

“The police use dogs in airports. Creatures that look at the world from a different viewpoint can be convenient. Youkai testimony may not be valid evidence in a trial, but that does not matter *in this business.*”

“Hmph. I do not like irregularities like that. And it seems a Youkai is involved in this incident as well.”

As the supervisor of 8000 people using a sturdy plan and security system, he would naturally dislike Youkai that could be like loopholes in a treasure chest. Not that I cared what he thought.

“If you insist, I can leave him outside, but it might make it take longer to resolve this. Do you have the time for that?”

“…Do as you wish,” spat out Itou in true annoyance.

I leaned up against the wall in the smoking space of the factory grounds and mentioned what we had to do first.

“What matters most are the people. We need to gather everyone in one place.”

“What are you saying? Do you want us to release the remaining prisoners? They are negative existences to Kuroyama.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that matters anymore.”

“?”

“We were thinking about the basic structure of this all wrong.” I poked at the Sunekosuri’s sulking cheek with my boot because he had stopped wagging his tail. “I have a question for you. *Which would be easier: causing over 8000 jailers and prisoners to disappear without a trace or to deceive just the few of us?*”

“You can’t mean…”

“I do. It is easier to assume we are the ones trapped by whatever is going on. I couldn’t tell you if this is a dream, an illusion, the past, the future, a parallel world, or a miniature world, though.”

Whatever the trick was, if the person in control of this “place” was in here with us, it would be best for everyone to monitor everyone else to keep them from taking action.

It was possible the culprit was someone else and therefore outside of this “place”, but if so, we would need to prove it and determine who it was we had to fight.

Itou lightly clicked his tongue.

“A Youkai, hm?”

“Any ideas what kind it might be?”

“This corporate prison is not a health resort that makes use of nature. We camouflaged it as a high tech semiconductor factory to repel any interference of that sort. But it seems someone bypassed that in some way.”

Itou’s gaze turned toward the Sunekosuri.

It seemed he really did not like that canine Youkai’s presence.

“Understood. We will search for the person behind this. If your theory is correct, this is a very serious problem.”

Itou turned around and disappeared down the hallway with a regulated pace.

Finally, the Sunekosuri spoke up.

“C-can we really allow this!? This goes beyond a violation of human rights. They’re forcibly locking up whistleblowers, the losers of conflicts between factions, and consumer groups!!”

“Why are you getting so worked up, Sunekosuri-chan? This is a large scale factory with a dorm intended to support low income workers. That’s what the official documents say. Even if you photographed the prison block with a net-connected camera, it’s possible no one would be caught.”

The system behind it had originally been created to prevent the country’s deindustrialization, but it had more recently been used to provide jobs to the rapidly-increasing numbers of domestic hikikomori to counteract the rise of labor costs in emerging nations. Many had hoped it would help decrease the amount of money spent on welfare, but as you can see, it ended up being completely misused.

“Humans are made so they cannot withstand truly doing nothing. But the general public is not aware of this fact. They will think those people ‘have it easy’ or are ‘lazy’.”

The harshest treatment in a prison was solitary confinement.

At first glance, a private room one did not have to share with a

fellow prisoner might sound convenient, but after spending five to ten days doing nothing, having no one to speak to, and sitting in a small, dark room, the human mind would easily raise the white flag.

Prison sentences could come with hard labor requirements or not, but most of those without the requirement would be unable to withstand doing nothing and request work of their own free will.

Then again, this was all something you could never truly understand until you had been locked up yourself. That was why it could pass without suspicion on paper.

“According to the prison block’s secret manual, the prisoners are usually locked in their private cells and not allowed to do anything. Only the most well behaved of the prisoners are allowed to clean the facility or are given free time in the decoy dorm block. This is done as camouflage so dust does not pile up in the rooms and they look lived in. …If you get down to it, that’s all this place is. This is not a gloomy facility where prisoners are tortured or executed. It is maintained so that everyone has clothing, food, and shelter, they are given opportunities to work and earn money, and an effort is made to keep their ties to society from being severed.”

While they were all paid salaries in the official data, the prisoners never had a chance to spend that money and none of them even knew the bank account number it was transferred into.

If the prisoners who did not have to do anything and therefore “had it easy” felt cornered by the situation and committed suicide, the corporation was not responsible in the slightest. They had built up a foundation that allowed that excuse to be made. It was quite well constructed.

“How can you say that about a horrible facility with a suicide rate of over 85%!?”

“But the rest of the world does nothing about it. They just sigh and wonder how entitled these people must have been to give up when they were supported so comfortably with the people’s tax money and were allowed to laze around in an air conditioned room all day.”

“That may be the false impression being given to the general public, but isn’t that why we were sent here!?”

“Come on now. Hyakki Yakou asked me to investigate the situation in Four Mountains’ semiconductor factory. If necessary, someone will make a decision once they receive my report. …But this corporate prison is being run by human hands alone, so it might not be in Hyakki Yakou’s jurisdiction.”

“How can you say that when you are an embodiment of unrestrained violence? With your skill, you could easily crush these villains.”

“But it is you and the rest of Hyakki Yakou who prevent the occult from being used so chaotically. Don’t forget that.”

My radio then emitted an electronic tone.

It was from Itou, the supervisor from before. It seemed he had succeeded in gathering all the members who were left in the corporate prison…or more accurately, who had been taken from the real corporate prison.

I walked to the indicated location along with the Sunekosuri.

It seemed to be an employee cafeteria primarily meant for the jailers. Some beckoning cat bottle cap dolls were located here as well.

Who’s the one who collects those?

The space contained a few long tables and folding chairs. At one end, a few men and women wearing identical workwear were gathered.

Itou Takeru: age 65, male, jailer, and the head jailer who supervised the prison block.

Yamada Ken: age 35, male, jailer, and guard for the materials shipment gate.

Sakai Haruka: age 33, female, jailer, and guard for the main gate.

Kurumaya Nozomi: age 24, female, jailer, and guard for the outdoor factory areas plus head of hard labor management.

Tanishita Hajime: age 41, male, jailer, and monitor room worker sent from the Royal Security Company.

Suzukawa Izumi: age 17, female, prisoner #0899, and sentenced to

a 202 year imprisonment.

Gogan Sakura: age 50, female, prisoner #1807, and sentenced to a 150 year imprisonment.

Every single one of them was wearing the unfashionable factory work uniform, so they showed no real individuality. Then again, I was wearing the same thing.

I did think something was wrong when the Sunekosuri stood out the most, though.

Unsurprisingly, we could not hold a friendly conversation.

Suzukawa and Gogan, the two prisoners, were glancing over toward the employee cafeteria's exit.

"You should probably give up that idea," I pointed out in order to nip that problem in the bud. "Most likely, the ones *trapped by some technique* are us and not the other 8000. If you escape outside the facility right now, what do you plan to do next? That would be like returning to your normal life with some strange hypnotism in your head. You would have no idea what might cause your destruction."

"But this is the perfect chance for them if they were the ones behind this."

The one who said that was Yamada, a coward desperate to look intimidating so his opponent would not try to pick a fight with him. Not that that mattered.

Yamada-chi glared back and forth between the two prisoners Suzukawa Izumi and Gogan Sakura.

"They trapped us in whatever this is so they can get outside while the security network isn't functioning! That makes this simple. If we kill the source, we'll be sent back to where we came from!!"

"What if we need a cancellation key only the person who did this knows? We might be stuck living out the rest of our life spans in this empty world devoid of any other human life."

"Gh," groaned the cowardly Yamada Ken before falling silent.

Kurumaya Nozomi, another of the jailers, looked over at me nervously.

“I-I think there is someone…even more suspicious than the prisoners. In fact, I don’t see how…how the prisoners could assemble a Youkai’s power into a Package while being so strictly monitored.”

“Who do you think is suspicious?” urged Itou the supervisor.

Kurumaya’s shoulders jumped slightly and her wandering gaze turned back toward me.

Sakai Haruka, a female jailer with heavy makeup, held her hands together and raised her index finger.

“Hah hahn. That’s a good point. This bizarre phenomenon occurred once you two arrived. I suppose the outsiders would be the most suspicious.”

“We do agree you should suspect us as much as anyone,” I said gently before continuing in a sharp tone. “But if I did this, would I really suggest having everyone gather here? If I had the prisoners left in solitary confinement and another bizarre phenomenon occurred during our strategy meeting, don’t you think suspicion would turn toward the prisoners?”

“You intentionally didn’t do that so you could use that fact to turn suspicion away from you!!”

“An excellent point!!”

Sakai had tried to use that to press me even further, but my sudden announcement left her confused.

I ignored that woman in her thirties with gaudy makeup and quickly continued speaking.

“Whoever is behind this large scale plan will be after something more than causing a small panic. There has to be something else coming that they are truly after. With that in mind, why were we chosen? Can you think of any common factors between us?”

“Now that you mention it,” said the male jailor Tanishita Hajime as he nervously toyed with his glasses. “It would have been simpler if it was almost entirely jailers or prisoners, but there are a few of each. And our posts and positions are all different. I can’t think of any common factor.”

“Yes, yes. And to drive that home, the Sunekosuri and I are outsiders.”

There was also the fact that my sister and the detective were here too, but that was a secret.

To be honest, there was a possibility the core of this phenomenon was outside the corporate prison, but it would be best to search through the strictly guarded prison while my guest ID was valid.

“…”

Naturally, the jailer group controlled the conversation and Suzukawa Izumi and Gogan Sakura of the prisoner group both remained silent. They were drinking cold water from a water server in one corner of the employee cafeteria. It was one of those things with an upside down tank about the size of a daruma doll and a faucet attached. It had an incredibly vague label saying “Clean Water from Near Kyushu”.

Hm?

But why is there a water server here in Four Mountains?

It bothered me a bit, but I had to focus on the conversation.

“It is unclear who the culprit was trying to make vanish. It’s possible they wanted to make themselves vanish. However, they included people clearly unrelated to their ultimate goal. Why is that?”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Itou with a frown.

The nervous-looking jailer Kurumaya Nozomi continued by saying, “Wh-what if the people near the target happened to be swallowed up as well?”

“Even though the jailers here are from different posts and positions and the prisoners can’t leave their cells? Even though this group would never have gathered in one place like this otherwise?” I shrugged. “In fact, if you could freely choose any target, why not make only yourself disappear? That would give you the freedom to move wherever you wanted in the factory or even outside it. But the culprit didn’t do that. They involved others. Why?”

This was not simply a prisoner’s jailbreak plan.

The jailers had no reason to mess with the security of the corporate prison. Any prison held the risk of the workers being killed in a riot.

Unless of course, a jailer wanted to kill another jailer or a jailer wanted to elope with a prisoner they had fallen in love with.

“The culprit needed to include some kind target in this as well as themselves. Normally, just involving themselves and the target would be the simplest method. However, that would give away who caused it right away. In that case, they would need to mix in a few outsiders to hide themselves.”

“Is that why it’s a mix of jailers and prisoners and why we’re all from different posts?”

I nodded toward the cowardly Yamada-kun.

We were the padding characters in a mystery novel. With the Sunekosuri and me, there were nine people. That was just about the perfect number. Everyone looked suspicious and the number was low enough that you could recall of the characters’ faces without going over a list.

“With a Youkai Package, hundreds of people work together to assemble a single criminal system. However, both the jailers and prisoners had enough people to pull that off. The preparations could have been made here in this semiconductor factory…in this corporate prison.” I spread my arms. “But as an outsider, I do not have detailed information on the inside of the prison and I would not notice any small changes. For example, I do not know what kinds of Youkai exist in this area. How about we discuss that sort of thing in search of a clue? C’mon, even simple rumors are enough.”

Itou Takeru, Yamada Ken, Sakai Haruka, Kurumaya Nozomi, Tanishita Hajime, Suzukawa Izumi, and Gogan Sakura exchanged glances. However, there was no trust in their eyes. They were staring at each other with suspicion deep in their hearts.

“I don’t know anything about Youkai. Are you sure it wasn’t something brought in from somewhere else?”

“I-I’ve never looked in the forest, though.”

The jailers cautiously spoke up, but the prisoners remained silent. That was not surprising. The ones who did not want to draw closer to everyone else were the prisoners who had been oppressed before.

Plus, I was continuing to play the role of a jailer. They did not want to do what I said.

But that was a problem.

“What about you two?”

“What? Do you two know something?”

“I…”

It happened just as the high school aged girl prisoner began speaking.

With no warning, the sole of Yamada Ken’s shoe suddenly jammed directly into the girl’s solar plexus.

“G-geh!! Cough cough…!!”

“Don’t mumble and hide shit from us! Who do you think you are!?”

As Suzukawa Izumi fell to her knees and held her stomach with both hands, Coward-kun went in for another kick.

The other prisoner suddenly cut in.

“Wait! Didn’t you hear her start to say something!?”

“Then why didn’t she say it from the beginning instead of trying to hide it!? If we tell you to show us everything your hiding, it’s your job to show us everything down to your asshole! That goes for you too, you old bitch. Who do you think you’re talking to!? If you do anything to upset me, I might just break both your legs!!”

…Ahh ahh, does he not understand the situation here?

If the culprit was one of us, it was entirely possible the game master behind it all could be one of the prisoners. Mystery novels were my sister’s territory, but the culprit would often commit a murder not in the original plan if things grew inconvenient.

And even if the culprit was one of the jailers, the odds were not all that low that they would *decide to kill the person causing trouble for the prisoners* to divert suspicion away from themselves. That would send everyone’s suspicion toward the prisoners.

Sunekosuri-chan.

Stop letting out that rare growl toward that lame coward over there.

He's probably the first to die even if we do nothing.

"I-I know…" began Suzukawa Izumi while faintly breathing and being held in Gogan Sakura's arms. "I know of a rumor passed between the prisoners about a fr-free pass. I don't know what it is, but it seems there's a special category of the well-behaved prisoners who are chosen to go above ground to clean. If they return by assembly time, they are free to leave the factory grounds."

"Don't make shit up!!"

I held out a hand to calm down the "badass" Yamada-chan who was about to grow violent again.

"What about you?" I asked the prisoner in her fifties.

"I have heard of the free pass."

"Even though you are all in solitary confinement?"

"It is possible to speak with the other prisoners while cleaning outdoors. That refreshing feeling is one of the reasons that periodically acquiring the ticket for cleaning duty is the difference between living on and being driven to suicide." Gogan Sakura turned a blatantly hostile look toward Yamada. "But I do not know if it actually exists or not. It might be a rumor the jailers tell to toy with the prisoners or it might be a lie one prisoner made up to take advantage of another."

In a corporate prison without money or stores, I saw little reason for fraud.

Or…

Perhaps without any money, something else held value in this prison.

When I asked, Itou Takeru the head jailer sighed in annoyance

"I have occasionally heard of alcohol showing up. Both those selling it and those buying it are 'dealt with' as soon as it is found."

"That isn't too uncommon."

Secretly making wine or brandy or growing hallucinogenic

mushrooms was common in prisons where few pleasures were to be found. It was well known enough to appear in mafia movies. I was not surprised to hear something similar had occurred in this corporate prison.

“Alcohol is not something that can simply be left in place. The temperature and humidity need to be carefully managed. To adjust for that, wouldn’t someone need to use this free pass to periodically check on the barrel?”

“Perhaps. By the way, have you ever found the secret distillery itself?”

I had meant it as a casual question, but Itou Takeru’s shoulders drooped. Cowardly Yamada-kun and gaudy Sakai looked awkwardly away from the old man.

I sighed and said, “If they were able to hide that, they could have hidden other things as well, right?”

“Alcohol can be used to make money. We had feared one of the delivery workers that brings parts in from outside might be involved. Then again, the system we have created is not one that allows a jailbreak with only a shovel.”

“Yet that security was completely useless when a Youkai was involved.”

Instead of Itou the head jailer, all of the subordinate jailers glared at me.

It seemed none of them wanted me to give him a reason to grow angry.

I continued regardless.

“Then maybe we should start there. Where was this occasional supply of alcohol made? If we know where it was hidden, we might find signs of some other trick.”

“We checked,” said cowardly Yamada-kun in annoyance. “We checked every inch within the walls! Our only achievement was finding some termites. We didn’t find any barrels. And I’ve never seen any suspicious Youkai or anything.”

“U-um, we could check over everything again now, but it might

take more than a day with the number of people we have," added Kurumaya-chan, the nervous female jailer.

I simply replied, "Then maybe there isn't anything within the walls."

"You're the one that brought it up! You keep jumping from topic to topic!"

"I only said it isn't within the walls. Could the distillery be hidden outside the walls?"

After all, the Four Mountains area was a clean water jug for the semiconductor factory.

It contained nothing but overly untouched nature and an abandoned village that had been submerged in bloodshed several decades ago.

There were more than enough places to hide a distillery, acquire a Youkai, or put together a Package.

"It's possible," agreed Itou while sounding annoyed. "But that leaves the crucial question of how they periodically left the walls."

"That would be the free pass. It seems to have been even more convenient than we thought."

The jailer group turned toward Suzukawa Izumi and Gogan Sakura.

The high school aged Suzukawa shrank back.

"H-how should we know!?"

"That's right. And if this free pass really exists, why would they come and go? Why not leave once and then run off?"

That was exactly right.

However…

"If the person using the free pass was planning a large scale jailbreak, escaping alone would not be their ultimate goal."

"Wha-…!?"

"That means the prisoners really are the most suspicious!!"

Cowardly Yamada seemed to mistakenly think his IQ would go up every time he grew violent because he tried to lash out at Suzukawa-chan again. I spoke up to stop him.

“However, nothing says only the prisoner group could use the free pass. If there is a way to get a heavily guarded prisoner outside the prison walls, one of the jailers could easily sneak out as well.”

“Wait, wait, wait!! This is no time to be joking around. Why the hell would we need to do that!?”

“Maybe you were dissatisfied with the prison’s power structure or you were following some idea of justice. There were several thousand jailers, after all. It wouldn’t be surprising if one or two felt sorry for the prisoners and tried to destroy the system here.”

Was it one of the jailers, one of the prisoners, or some newly-formed group spanning both sides that wished to destroy the corporate prison?

Itou Takeru, the head jailer and supervisor, could not have liked the sound of any the possibilities.

Or was he intentionally giving off such a nervous aura to turn suspicion elsewhere?

“By the way, do you have any ideas concerning this free pass?”

“I doubt there is a hole through the walls and your security is not foolish enough to allow a tunnel to be made, right?”

“Of course not!? Are you fucking with us!?”

“In that case,” I said while winking and resisting the urge to cover my ears. “Keep in mind that this facility functions as a semiconductor factory, so it is not a completely isolated and closed off place. Materials are brought in and products and waste are brought out. Would it be easy to hide in one of those trucks?”

A few of the jailers turned toward Sakai Haruka’s gaudy face.

Come to think of it, she managed the main gate.

“Wait, wait, please wait! We check through every single truck! Anyone would think of that!!”

“I thought as much. But there is a corporate prison truck that has to

be kept secret mixed in with the official semiconductor factory trucks. That one goes without an inspection, right?"

"?"

"A truck is needed to dispose of the dead. I hear prisoners die here quite frequently, but you don't just bury them around here, do you? You must have a corpse disposal infrastructure. There has to be some cycle set up to quickly and surely dispose of them. Am I wrong?"

Itou Takeru, the head jailer, clicked his tongue.

The look on his face plainly said he did not want to explain this.

"Any corpses in an unusual state for suicide are left to another division in Kuroyama. We freeze them and load them aboard a refrigerated truck."

"Do you know what happens after that?"

"I have had it explained to me, but I have never been involved in it myself. They completely freeze them with liquid nitrogen or something and smash them to pieces. Supposedly, they are turned into a sherbet, bones and all. This is made into fish food. Kuroyama makes electronics, so it runs tons of freighters. In the middle of international waters, the fish food is scattered into the ocean, so no one is aware of it."

The two prisoners, Suzukawa Izumi and Gogan Sakura, both paled.

I looked down at the Sunekosuri who looked oddly irritated.

"So someone could hide inside the corpse-filled truck and not be found. I don't know how often the trucks come and go, but someone could make it back the same day if it's more than twice a day. Right?"

However…

If that thinking was accurate, the situation was very bad.

Even the corporate prison grounds were too large for us to search through in a day. Now it was possible the area had expanded to the entirety of the Four Mountains area.

We would of course eventually find the answer if we performed a

thorough search.

But would the culprit wait that long? They could cause mysterious phenomena as much they wanted, so wouldn't they block us from reaching their mysterious hiding spot and cleverly work to achieve their goal?

"What the hell?" muttered cowardly Yamada in annoyance. "Outside the prison? Is some ghost of Zenmetsu Village wandering around?"

"Now that you mention it." Inspired by cowardly Yamada's comment, the prisoner Gogan Sakura spoke up. "I heard something about a ghost of Zenmetsu Village."

"?"

"The semiconductor factory – or rather, the corporate prison – is made up of people who came from outside Four Mountains. Eight thousand people work and live here, but they are all outsiders."

"And?"

"But I hear there is one mixed in," said Gogan Sakura while stroking the girl's back. "I do not know if it is a jailer or prisoner, but *there is a survivor of the slaughter in Zenmetsu Village somewhere in here.*"

The atmosphere suddenly froze over.

It seemed the incident at Zenmetsu Village was a taboo topic here.

I was curious what these people had to be afraid of when they had created this corporate prison that systematically mass produced suicides by giving people nothing to do.

"That's just a ridiculous rumor and desire," spat out Itou Takeru the supervisor. "Let me guess. Does the story claim this survivor is waiting for a chance to take revenge against those living comfortably in the factory? It's just a dream of someone doing to the jailers what the prisoners cannot."

"Th-that's right. And the incident at Zenmetsu Village happened 30 years ago during the conflict between the villagers and the corporation over who could use the underground water. To have been around back then, they would need to be-…"

The nervous jailer Kurumaya Nozomi trailed off and her face paled in shock.

That's right.

Itou Takeru is a dandy in his fifties.

"Ridiculous."

"Well, that would make me a suspect, too," laughed the middle-aged Gogan Sakura self-deprecatingly. "And the term 'survivor' is pretty vague in the first place. I've also heard versions of the rumor that say a survivor sent a descendent to the factory, so age might not be much help. The rumors are clear about one thing though: *this person is definitely here.*"

I see.

So is the murderer taking a U-turn?

No, Itou mentioned taking revenge against those in the factory, so maybe Zenmetsu Village was systematically wiped out by an assassination group hired by the corporation.

If that's the case, it might be time to add a subtitle saying "the true murderer has arrived!"

"Heh! That's just a dream of you losers!! That's just you pathetic prisoners coming up with a convenient hero in your heads because you can't do anything yourselves!!"

"It does not sound convenient to me," replied the prisoner Suzukawa Izumi as if spitting out the words. She averted her gaze from cowardly Yamada. "After all, some of the rumors say *the survivor of Zenmetsu Village will indiscriminately slaughter both jailers and prisoners.*"

Now, everything had warmed up nicely.

There were three things we needed to look into for the moment.

1. What Youkai had carried out this bizarre phenomenon?

2. Was the rumor of a free pass true?

3. Was there really a survivor of Zenmetsu Village within the factory?

Of course, the biggest question was the following:

Who was the culprit behind all this?

Part 19 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Sounds similar to people walking through the dead grass continued through the run-down shacks in the remains of the village.

Madoka tugged on arm to get me to run, but I could not move.

This was partly due to my hips feeling like they were going to give out.

But this intense fear also made me want to see what this was. I wanted to sweep it away. I could not stand any more, so I wanted to settle everything here. That pessimistic courage led me to focus on what lay beyond the thick fog.

And…

I saw something glitter at a very, very low position through the fog. It was as low as someone's shoelaces.

…*Metallic luster?*

The identity of what was approaching showed itself.

It was not troops from the Kuroyama Electronics Group as Yokoeda Tadashi had suggested.

"Sn-snakes?" said Madoka in confusion. "Shinobu-kun, it's a swarm of snakes!! *They're everywhere!!*"

She was exactly right. They were black snakes about 30 centimeters long and about as thick as a little finger. They spread out enough to cover one entire compass direction.

Humans tended to view something in large enough numbers as a single whole and give it special meaning. For example, a city nightscape. This was the same. The writhing mass of snakes had become something different from simple reptiles. They were a single monster. A sense of disgust rushed from the tips of my fingers and up the thick nerves of my spine.

Madoka's face paled and she shouted out.

"We need to go, Shinobu-kun. We don't know what kind of snakes these are. They might be venomous! If we're bit here, we have no way of being treated!"

“No, wait a second…”

The snakes had something like a gold ring around their heads.

Every single one of the snakes had this artificial sign that would never be seen on a wild snake.

Where have I seen something like this…?

“That’s right! Below the floor in Zenmetsu Village! A broken jar had held a bunch of gold rings. Are those the same as what’s on these snakes!?”

If so, did that mean these snakes had been raised in the houses of Zenmetsu Village?

A large number of snakes, a jar, and gold rings.

What is this? I feel like I’ve heard something similar to this before.

Dammit. It’s right on the tip of my tongue…

“Shinobu-kun!!”

When Madoka shouted at me from close by once more, I finally realized the swarm of snakes was about to reach my feet.

“Wah!”

I frantically jumped back and left with Madoka. We ran. We fled.

We did not know where Yokoeda Tadashi had gone, but we did not have time to search for him. We ran through the thick fog in a random direction.

“Y-you’ve got to be kidding me. We’ve been doing nothing but running around! And without any chance for warm up exercises. I had better not get a leg cramp and hurt my Achilles tendon.”

“Hey, where are we?”

We ran and ran and ran and ran.

By the time I suddenly came to a stop, the run-down shacks were nowhere to be found. Only the rotten dead grass continued on ahead of us. The fog did not help, but the lack of any visible landmarks was more frightening than I would have thought. It felt

like being abandoned in the middle of a desert.

“I don’t know. We haven’t run all the way to Mars, have we?”

“I think I see something up ahead.”

After catching our breath, Madoka and I headed deeper into the fog.

Something was neatly lined up like desks in a classroom.

They were giant stones.

“…Another graveyard? We already saw one.”

“But this isn’t the same place as before. The surface of these gravestones looks a lot more carefully carved.

Did they have some reason for splitting their graveyard into two places?

If Yokoeda Tadashi was with us, we might have been able to ask him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Also, these gravestones did not really matter at the moment.

We had no idea when that swarm of snakes would arrive and there could easily be more than one swarm. In the worst case, the entire Four Mountains area could be the snakes’ habitat and they could fill the entire area.

I was worried about our classmates, but this was no situation in which to begin a random search.

We had to ensure our own safety first.

We walked past the graveyards and the feel of the area changed. Everything was still falling apart, but a wall made of piled up stones cut across. It did not match my impression of the people who had lived in storage shed sized houses made of plywood and galvanized sheet iron. It felt like the basic standard had suddenly shot up.

“It looks like we can get in here,” said Madoka.

Instead of a gate, she had found a crumbled area of the wall.

We stepped over it and continued on.

Two thick wooden pillars stood side by side. Madoka commented

that they looked like a torii. This was not an explosion of deductive reasoning on her part. Beyond it, we found a wooden shrine that had been crushed into nothing but a pile of wood.

Compared to the plywood and iron from before, the building had likely had a fair bit of style.

If it had not been smashed into pieces, that is.

The shrine had been smashed down to its foundation and the pile of wooden material had plenty of parts that had been scorched black. It would take quite a bit of persistence to destroy a building to this extent.

“Why would you destroy a shrine? What happened?”

“Was there a coup d’etat by the people?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the grade of the shrine was clearly greater than those dilapidated shacks. There must have been a pretty big class divide. If you cannot resolve your dissatisfaction, it simply builds up. Once it passed a certain level, it can explode out in the form of physical violence.”

We circled around the destroyed shrine and realized a few houses existed beyond it.

That’s right. Houses.

These large rural houses were a lot like my own thatch-roof house. They were quite different from the plywood and iron shacks. It seemed the people belonging to a special class had been gathered within that stone wall.

But unlike the shrine, these houses had not been destroyed.

The thatch roofs had rotted away from neglect and about half of the roofs had crumbled into the buildings, but that was simply due to the passage of time. There was no sign of blunt weapons breaking pillars or fires being set like there was with the shrine.

“It looks like that shrine received special treatment.”

“These are a lot different from the plywood and iron shacks from before. These buildings make me think the owners had some

money.”

Really?

I had lived in an Intellectual Village’s thatch-roof house all my life, so I did not actually know how much a house like this was worth.

How much would one of these cost?

“But these houses are falling apart as much as the others, so I doubt they can protect us from those snakes.”

I stepped inside one of the houses with my shoes on.

The wood floor of the hallway creaked so much I was worried about breaking through. I could see old dressers and hanging scrolls, so it had a very different atmosphere to the plywood houses where people had seemed barely able to survive.

“They look wealthy enough, but they still didn’t have gas or running water.”

“There’s something that looks like a hastily written account book again.”

I touched a bundle of Japanese paper placed on the wall. I used my phone to photograph a few of the pages that looked like they were about to crumble from the moisture.

I stepped into the kitchen that had a furnace and a giant water jug. That was a sight you did not even see in an Intellectual Village. I crouched down and tapped on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought there might be one here too.”

After I checked around a bit, I found a spot that made a different noise. I slid my hand across and found a rusty latch. It was a door to a storage area under the floor. I pulled it open and found a small rectangular space. And inside…

“Look at that jar. It’s on its side, but it isn’t broken yet.”

“Are those things spilling out of the jar the gold rings that were on those snakes’ heads?”

I had a feeling those snakes were some kind of Youkai.

I scooped up the jar from the storage area. It must have held quite a few gold rings because it made a jangling noise when I shook it slightly.

A piece of Japanese paper that had yellowed with age was attached to the side of the jar.

The characters were written too sloppily to read, but they appeared to be the same as the ones from that plywood shack.

The paper had two kanji on it.

"…Tou? I think that first kanji is Tou."

"But the second one is way too complex to read. I'm not even sure if that's a kanji we use anymore."

These jars existed in both the wealthy houses and the plywood shacks.

The jars contained gold rings identical to the ones on that swarm of snakes.

Are those snakes a Youkai that sticks with a house like a Zashiki Warashi?

However…

I had never heard of a Zashiki Warashi that continued protecting a house even after its residents were gone. From what I had seen of Zenmetsu Village, a house Youkai would have no reason to remain here for decades afterwards.

The only exception was Yokoeda Tadashi who had lived here the entire time.

But he had mistaken the swarm of snakes for human assassins, so it seemed unlikely that he was those snakes' family and that they were all under his control.

Thirty years before, the villagers of Zenmetsu Village had been slaughtered. If those were normal snakes, those gold rings would have to be placed on any new snakes as they were born, but Yokoeda Tadashi, the only person here, did not seem to know about them.

That left no one to put those gold rings on them.

Yet all of those countless snakes had the gold rings.

Were they always like that?

Are they Youkai that never age and never change form?

“What should we do now?” asked Madoka. “This is probably the most extravagant and sturdiest part of the village. …Even this wealthy district is falling apart. If those snakes arrive again, they will be able to get in through all the gaps.”

“True. Just hiding isn’t going to cut it.”

“Where should we go?”

“If those snakes are a type of Youkai, there might be some kind of text explaining how to use them. And conveniently enough, this is the home of some of the most influential people of the village.”

“But it’s all written so sloppily we cannot read it.”

“It’s better than not trying at all.”

After all, Youkai could not be killed by any normal means. Making a Molotov cocktail from the fuel in the generator outside would not be enough to protect us. There was only one way to deal with Youkai: investigate the characteristics of that type and remove yourself from the conditions causing them to attack you.

And so Madoka and I began a thorough search of the mansion.

We passed by a pillar that was bent like a bow, crouched below a rotting ceiling that looked like it could collapse at any moment, watched it actually collapse behind us, and walked across rotten straw from the thatch roof. A few documents stored in an old bookshelf were still intact, but everything else was much more difficult to deal with. Most of them had fused into a single mass like a bundle of wet toilet paper.

“But we can’t read any of this…”

“I told you.”

Madoka tossed a bundle of Japanese paper aside and leaned up against a nearby wall.

And then she disappeared.

Or so it seemed.

She had actually broken through the rotten mud wall and fallen backwards out of the building.

“Gyah!!”

“Try for a cute ‘kyahn!’ next time, Madoka!”

I ran out the square hole that had once held a sliding door and ran over to where she had fallen out into the backyard. Madoka was lying on her back while covered in rotten building material. For

better or for worse, the squishy material seemed to have cushioned her head. Her uniform's skirt was flipped up by quite a bit, revealing gray boxer shorts that were so disappointing I wanted to cry.

The world grew dark before my eyes.

"You idiot!! Do you think you're a guy!?"

"But this is more comfortable! And it matches the sports bra!! And why are you the one getting angry when my underwear is on full display!? …Wait."

Madoka then seemed to spot something.

She pointed through the fog.

"Shinobu-kun, look at that."

"Hm? What is it?"

I had not noticed it before, but it seemed a sharp upward slope began right behind the house. It was either a cliff or one of the mountains around Four Mountains.

But Madoka had not been referring to it.

"No, that over there." She pointed at the same spot once more. "There is a cave."

Part 20 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

We had decided to drive to a service area where we could use our cell phones to gather data. But that plan quickly failed.

It happened once we had arrived near the interchange.

“Dammit, what is going on?”

Our speed dropped and then the engine suddenly died.

“You’re kidding! Did the battery give out!?”

“The light wasn’t on, though.”

Sitting around in the driver’s seat was not going to fix anything, so I left the mystery freak in the car and stepped outside. I wanted to know if this was something I could fix with the tools in the rental car, so I opened the hood to check the engine.

As soon as the metal hood lifted up…

I spotted a ton of strange snakes filling the engine area.

“Wah! Ah!?”

I instinctually jerked my hands away from the hood. The metal hood fell down with a loud bang. Enbi’s eyes opened wide because she did not know what was happening, but I did not have time to worry about that.

The hood had not fully closed.

Black snakes as thick as a little finger came crawling out as if overflowing through the remaining gap.

It was such a repulsive sight that I tripped and fell onto my butt as I tried to back away.

Is this what caused the engine to stall? No wild animal would want to get inside there! And how were they not fried from being in there!?

As if in opposition to my sensible question, black snake after black snake plopped down on the road with no visible sign of burns. None of the rules I knew applied here. This gave me an intensely bad

feeling. My eyes met with the eyes of one of those black snakes that all had something like a gold ring around their heads.

These were creatures that could not be killed with normal means.

It can't be…

Are these…

"Youkai…?"

As soon as I uttered that word, the dozens of snakes vanished as if they had dissolved into the fog. They had not simply fled. They had clearly vanished on the spot like dry ice.

The mystery freak must have realized something was wrong because she got out of the passenger seat.

"Detective, what's the matter?"

"Well…"

I was unsure I could accurately explain what had happened.

I was half ready to decide it was a hallucination caused by exhaustion.

However…

"Huh? Something's stuck in the hood."

I gave a start because I thought one of those snakes might still be there, but it seemed that was not the case.

"It's a sneaker."

"A sneaker?"

I stood up with a puzzled look.

The mystery freak opened the hood a bit to pull out a white sneaker. It was only the right sneaker. Its design was plain, but I recognized it.

"That goes with a prisoner uniform."

"So does it belong to Hasebe Michio?"

Enbi and I exchanged a glance.

I undid the button on the sneaker's clasp, removed the lining, and checked through it. My fingertips came across a small folded scrap of paper.

"Detective…"

"Don't look at me. If you have any complaints, take them to the prison guard in charge of checking over him."

Once unfolded, the paper was the size of a business card. It looked like a piece torn from notebook or memo pad paper.

A simple map was drawn on it.

It looked like the Four Mountains area, but it did not have the semiconductor factory marked despite that being the biggest landmark.

Instead…

"What's this X?"

"It certainly looks suspicious."

I got back in the car and turned the key, but the engine still refused to start. It seemed best to put off the trip to the service area until later.

I did not like how it seemed we were being guided by those snake Youkai, but I decided to check the X on the map hidden in Hasebe's sneaker.

Part 21 (Hishigami Mai)

I think it's just about time for Mai-chan to take her turn.

As we all monitored each other in the large employee cafeteria, I embraced the Sunekosuri that had been rubbing up against my legs.

I whispered, "(The power is going to go out soon and I will kill one of them.)"

"Bh!?" The Sunekosuri almost spat out in surprise. "(What!? Wh-wh-wh-wh-what!?")"

"(I sabotaged a breaker on the way here. This cafeteria has no windows, so it will be pitch black in here. The factory block will keep running, but the living areas will have a normal blackout.)"

This was like a game where a Kitsune and a Tanuki were trying to trick each other.

Unless I shook things up a bit, no one would make any mistakes.

My interpretation was that most of those here had no real connection to the incident. They were filler characters meant to make the real culprit harder to find. Killing them would not make this any better or worse. And so I had decided to kill the most powerful of those I had decided were definitely unrelated to the incident.

My choice was Itou Takeru.

He was the supervisor in charge of the entire corporate prison, so he had no reason to rely on a supernatural Youkai. He could freely kill a few people whether they were prisoners or jailers and he had a perfect method of disposing of the corpses using the system put in place by the Kuroyama Electronics Group.

He was a top rank candidate for the culprit's target, but I was not trying to help the culprit. If I killed Itou before they could, that was not my problem.

The prisoners were one thing, but the jailers would definitely be shaken if the fellow jailer with the most authority suddenly died. And if you ignored the Sunekosuri and me, there were five jailers

versus two prisoners. The jailers were in the majority, so if they panicked, the fear and shock would be transferred to the prisoners. That was the scary thing about groups.

And so I was going to kill Itou Takeru-san for a variety of reasons.

I hope you can forgive me.

“(B-before you said you couldn’t kill them!)”

“(Not if it isn’t absolutely necessary. I am doing this to reveal the truth of this bizarre phenomenon related to a Youkai, not to reveal the secrets of the corporate prison. That means I can have Hyakki Yakou clean up after me.)”

“(What happened to figuring out who the culprit is!? You even had everyone gather here!)”

“(What? Who ever said that was my plan? I was only pretending to handle this with logic in preparation for my real plan. Remember, my standard method is to handle everything with violence.)”

“(B-but you’re an outsider. You aren’t a prisoner or a jailer. If something goes wrong, they will blame you first.)”

“(True.)” I grinned. “(But what if that most suspicious person was killed? The group that was keeping calm by thinking of me as the villain would fall apart. And if one of those people is in control of the occult here, they will panic. And so they will use the occult that protects them even if they do not want to.)”

“(Wh-what do you mean killed?)”

“(The parking lot out front is filled with cars. I will board one and try to escape, but the car will explode spectacularly.)”

Cowardly Yamada must have grown irritated by our whispering because he clicked his tongue loudly.

Of course, I was whispering in front of everyone because I wanted to look as suspicious as possible.

“Hey, what’re you talking about over there?”

“You will see soon enough.”

I shrugged while still holding the Sunekosuri.

Immediately afterwards, the area was filled with darkness thanks to the sabotage to the breaker.

Okay, time to go.

Having to prove to the masses that your enemy had done something wrong before you attacked was only a rule in the territory my sister and that detective worked in.

For those that worked in secret like me, it was often the case that nothing else mattered as long as you uncovered the culprit in the very, very end.

Part 22 (Jinnai Shinobu)

A cave.

When I heard that, my expression must have been one of great displeasure.

It was dangerous enough searching through the half-crumbled, half-collapsed house that was not up to earthquake standards or any other standards for that matter, but a natural cave was something else entirely.

If you are imagining a limestone cave at a tourist spot that has a cool and mysterious mood year round, you are quite mistaken.

A cave that has not been maintained by human hands would be filled with hundreds of bugs. There would be spiders, centipedes, pill bugs, slugs, snails, mosquitos, flies, and every type of roach you're used to seeing. No one would want to go into a gathering spot for so many grotesque creatures.

On top of that, the ceiling could collapse at any time, the floor could collapse without warning, and overlooking a large crack could send you dropping upside down for several meters if not several dozen meters, scraping your body against a file-like wall all the while. There was also a danger of running out of oxygen or being exposed to poisonous volcanic gases.

The scariest part was that these extremely dangerous areas often looked completely normal from the outside. Even if I grew trapped inside, how likely do you think it is someone would come and rescue me? The odds seemed slimmer than those of a tights-wearing American comic book superhero gallantly showing up to rescue me from a mugging.

"Listen, Madoka-san. A city-raised bourgeois like you might not be aware, but entering a cave is just as dangerous as crossing a crumbling suspension bridge that you can't even imagine how long ago it last underwent maintenance. You can't just walk into one as easily as taking shelter from the rain… Wait, Madoka? Madoka-san!?"

She's gone!?

Madoka, who had just broken out through the fragile wall of the house and rolled into the backyard, had disappeared at some point.

As an unpleasant feeling raced up my back, I heard a girl's voice in the distance.

"Oh, it really is cool in here. But it kind of stinks. A bear doesn't sleep here, does it?"

"Get out of the cave!!"

She went in on her own!?

I peered into the two to three meter tall opening to the cave, but I could not see anything through the darkness. I doubted I would have been able to see anything even without the fog.

"Madoka! Madoka-saaan!! Leaving me alone in an abandoned village overflowing with the sense that it's cursed has about a 100% chance of making me piss myself, so could you come on back now!?"

"Eh? But this cave looks meaningful. It might lead us to a secret of Zenmetsu Village."

Meaningful?

I frowned at what Madoka had said.

As far as I could tell, this cave had not been maintained by human hands like some limestone cave. There was no torii, shimenawa, or stone monument with the cave's name. I could not see any evidence that this cave was viewed as special.

"Madoka, what are you talking about? Do you have any evidence?"

"…"

"What do you mean it looks meaningful? This may be a confusing situation, but it didn't sound like you were using the word wrong."

"…"

"Um, Madoka-san?"

"…"

“You’re remaining silent to force me to come in after you, aren’t you!?”

Dammit. This devil of a classmate knows how to manipulate guys too well!!

I was also saddened by how I had fallen for it and my heart had started to beat faster.

At any rate, it seemed I needed to enter the cave, but I was too afraid to grope around in that pitch black cave. I wanted a source of light.

“That thing used diesel, right?”

I circled around the outer wall of the house. There, I found a generator. It was rusted and falling apart, but a distinctive smell wafted out when I opened the fuel tank cover. I was exceedingly dubious whether it was of high enough quality to work in an engine, but it would likely still burn if you soaked it into a cloth and ignited it.

If I just had a stick of wood and an old rag, I could make a torch.

I acquire both items from the half-crumbled house and cautiously entered the cave with the light in hand.

Wait, I just thought of something… Torches don’t cause carbon monoxide poisoning like charcoal grills, do they?

“Damn this place is cramped.”

The cave did not look like a river had worn it down bit by bit. That said, it did not look like people had dug it out either. Overall, the cave was shaped like a warped triangle. The ground below must have shifted during an earthquake and it got caught on something that was now supporting this space. In other words, it could easily all come crashing down at any moment.

As I felt my balls shrivel up in fear, the orange light illuminated Madoka’s body.

It seemed she had been quite close by.

She had only been about 15 meters from the entrance.

“Oh, Shinobu-kun. A torch is quite the wild option. I was doing my

best with the backlight of my cell phone."

Madoka was grinning as if she had no fear in her heart at all.

It may have been because she had no balls to shrivel up in fear.

"How could you light up your phone in a place that could be filled with hundreds of disgusting bugs, rats, and bats? Animals tend to move toward light. What would you have done if they all rushed toward you at once? You would be transformed into some kind of frightening insect human."

"Ugeh. That can happen? But what about your torch, Shinobu-kun?"

"The danger is still there, but the fire can be used as a weapon. I can at least wave it around and run for the exit."

"Wow, what an outdoorsman. To be honest, my opinion of you just went up. Can you cook a meal over a campfire?"

Is that so? Maybe I should be honored to have a financial monster like you say that.

However…

"But it looks like there was nothing to worry about. I've lit up all the walls around here, but I haven't seen an insect or any other creature."

"Isn't that odd, though?"

After all, if there were not hundreds of insects here, there had to be a reason for the insects to not be here. I grew a bit concerned the dangers of low oxygen or volcanic gases were about to make themselves known.

My torch consumed oxygen, so the flame weakening considerably would warn us if the oxygen levels were dropping. The volcanic gases were the worst option. By the time we realized something was wrong, it would probably already be too late.

"Madoka, this seems pretty dangerous. There has to be something keeping away those disgusting bugs that not even insecticides can kill. We need to get out of here."

"I think we should be fine."

“?”

“Look, there’s light over there. That means there’s an exit.”

Madoka suddenly pointed to the side.

She was standing at a T-shaped intersection.

“With where we came in and that exit right over there, air has plenty of paths to blow through. Gas wouldn’t build up in here.”

It seemed the cave was not all that large.

I held out the torch to wipe away the darkness before me and found it reached a dead end after only about 10 meters. Even if you added in the distance to where we had entered, that was only about 25 meters.

“This place is surprisingly small.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. And I was sure this place was meaningful.”

“Are you disappointed you didn’t find a legendary dragon or some thieves’ hidden treasure?”

“No, not that.” Madoka raised her index finger. “This cave may be natural, but it was located right next to a house that probably belonged to one of the village’s ruling class. If it was only an eyesore, they could have had the villagers fill in the entrance.”

“Hm? Well, I suppose… But you saw that village. They didn’t have the leeway in their lifestyle for designing an aesthetic garden.”

“Perhaps, but the ruling class would be able to build their house wherever they wanted in Four Mountains. It’s odd for their choice of the optimum land to be near a cave.”

“I see. That does sound meaningful.”

I would never want to live near a cave. They had so many insects sleeping inside and all of those insects would come swarming out once it grew warm.

“Hey, Shinobu-kun. Something is glittering over there.”

“What?”

With the torch in hand, I approached in the direction she was pointing. Near the dead end when continuing straight into the cave were some needle-shaped depressions. I initially thought something like a large puddle existed in the middle of them, but I was wrong. The water was very clear yet I could not see the bottom. It was quite deep. The light of the torch did not reach all the way down. There seemed to be a pit here and only here.

“It looks like someone dug this.”

“Is it a well?”

“It looks like the same technique, but the water level is completely wrong. It could overflow at any time.”

There was no need to dig deep into the ground. The cave was already underground, so it was possible an underground stream passed by at a higher level than us. This well with an oddly high water level (or was it a spring?) may have struck an underground stream running through the mountain.

…If there’s an underground stream nearby, doesn’t that mean the ground here is even less reliable?

Also…

If they had the ability to dig a well, why did everyone in the village use water filters made from metal drums?

“Oh?”

Madoka crouched down and began poking at a stone the size of a pickling stone.

“There is something carved on here, but the kanji is too hard to read.”

“I’ll take a photo.”

I snapped a photo with my cell phone camera.

As far as trip memories went, this collection of photos was about the worst. I thought about creating an exorcism folder.

Nothing else inside caught our attention. Madoka and I walked back

down the way we had come and stopped at the T-shaped intersection. We had yet to check the other exit.

The presence of the light told us the exit was nearby. That meant the tunnel did not cut through to the other side of the mountain.

“Shinobu-kun, let’s go check it out.”

As I walked forward with the torch in one hand, the path quickly narrowed. It was so narrow I had to turn to the side to fit. The path also sloped sharply upwards and spiraled around.

However, this path from hell quickly came to an end.

“This is…?”

“We’ve come out at a higher point.”

We were probably three or four meters up, but the thick fog made it hard to tell for sure. We had taken a T-shaped intersection in the cave, but the two exits likely came out on the same slope. In fact, there was nowhere else an exit could be.

“Shinobu-kun, what should we do now?” Madoka must have been tired because she sat down without worrying about getting dirty. “Do you think we could climb the mountain and cross over out of Four Mountains?”

“Trying to climb a mountain of unknown height without food or water and while wearing leather shoes is pure insanity. Don’t forget the fog and that we don’t have a map or GPS.”

“Eh? If we just head straight, won’t we make it eventually?”

“If we come across a vertical cliff, are you fine with doing some free climbing? In leather shoes? I would at least want a lifeline.”

If you looked into what routes bullet trains and highways took, it became obvious how much land routes hated mountains.

“Boo, boo,” said Madoka as she pouted her lips.

Either her exhaustion and hopelessness had reached their limit or the lack of any useful information combined with the lack of anything more to investigate had irritated her. It must have been nice being a beautiful girl. Everything they did looked great. If she wasn’t so cute, I might have punched her for being so stubborn.

“We put in all this work, but we haven’t managed to get away. This is a lot like the Shokei Island serial murders case Enbi told me about a long time ago.”

“…Could you not bring up such ominous things?”

“Apparently, there was a closed room murder case in the remains of a coal mine on a remote island to the northeast. I think the trick had to do with using a wire to throw the key in through a tiny window.”

Suddenly, an incredibly light electronic tone broke through the unpleasant atmosphere of hopelessness.

Madoka and I exchanged a glance before frowning.

It was the sound of the cell phone in my pocket receiving an email. I had received several messages from the large-breasted Zashiki Warashi saying “I’m bored. Buy me a souvenir.”

“…I have a signal. But why!?”

“Look, Shinobu-kun. There’s an abandoned car over there!” said Madoka as she tapped on my shoulder.

I looked over and spotted a mass of brown rust sitting on the grassy mountain slope. She had called it a car, but it was a compact one-person vehicle that looked like a scooter with four wheels. It was an extra small electric car that automobile companies had made to ensure the elderly could go shopping.

“It must still work. The car navigation and the automatic break system need an internet connection. The electric car itself can function as a mobile Wi-Fi and 3G wireless hotspot, so it must have picked up on our phones’ signals!”

“Wait, wait, wait!!”

Humans tended not to doubt information that was convenient for them.

But this was too much.

“That’s way too modern! Zenmetsu Village’s civilization was on the level of using water filters and diesel generators. They didn’t even have any phone lines. Why are we suddenly finding an electric car

with a perfect net environment?"

"Eh? Well…"

"And the battery doesn't last forever. If this has been left here since the slaughter 30 years ago, who has been recharging it? And what about the OS and firmware? Has it been auto-updating itself all this time? If so, who has been paying the internet contract fees? If it was just left here, the contract would expire and it would stop functioning!"

"Shinobu-kun, we were attacked by someone in a run-down shack of Zenmetsu Village. Maybe this is his."

"I can't deny that 100%, but if he was hard up for food, wouldn't this be the first thing he sold? And how has he been paying the monthly contract fees?"

He had somehow obtained that portable gas stove and gas cylinder, so he may have had some kind of income. He might have collected magazines and sold them or captured rare rhinoceros beetles and sold them. But whatever he did, it would be for a tiny amount. I doubted he had a stable income to pay the thousands of yen he would need for this.

"Someone left it here to make periodic contact. They bought the lightest variety of electric car so they could leave it here on the slope where no one would notice it. But I doubt it was that man wandering around Zenmetsu Village who did it. In fact, don't you think it was put here on the slope specifically so he wouldn't find it?"

"If so, who did it?"

"I don't know…"

The car had to have had a license plate, but I could not see one. It was possible it had naturally rusted away, but it looked more like someone was intentionally hiding their personal information.

But thinking about this anymore was not going to help.

I looked back down at my cell phone.

"At any rate, our cell phones have a signal now. We can get the word out that we vanished from the tour bus and call for help from

professional rescuers.”

“Don’t forget this,” said Madoka as she poked at the back of my cell phone. “You took all those photos. Those sloppy kanji may be illegible to us, but don’t you think a Zashiki Warashi who has lived for a long, long time could read them?”

Part 23 (Hishigami Mai)

The story so far!!

Eight thousand people had vanished from a large scale factory and corporate prison, leaving only a few jailers and prisoners behind. But in reality those eight thousand had not disappeared and it was us who had been caught up in “something”. It was possible we were being treated as missing in the real world.

Now, that meant one of those few people was likely the culprit.

However, I had no intention of gathering small pieces of evidence like my sister or that detective. Physical evidence was only any use when things could be resolved in the courtroom.

I decided to kill one person I could rule out and then fake my own death when I seemed the most likely suspect. The remaining members would panic and begin suspecting each other. Basically, I was creating a situation where killing everyone but yourself would bring you peace of mind.

Would the mastermind behind all this take direct action or would they take defensive action to stop the others from growing violent? They possessed some kind of hidden occult power, so either way, they would use some strange ability.

I could resolve the situation by determining who it was and defeating them.

Anyway, after I killed the one person in the factory’s employee cafeteria, I headed for the parking lot and made it look like the stolen car I tried to flee in had exploded.

In reality, I was hiding behind a line of parked trucks, watching the burning car from a short distance.

I could see a few silhouettes through the thick fog.

“What is…going on?” muttered someone.

Whose voice is that? Oh, right. That’s the violent jailer Yamada-kun.

“She’s dead? But that woman had to be the killer! Then who killed

her!? I thought she was the one who killed the head jailer!”

The situation was not ideal.

I could see the light of the flames through the fog, but I could not grasp the details of the silhouettes. I would be unable to pick up on any small mannerisms or changes in expression like this. And I was supposed to be dead, so I could not carelessly approach either.

That meant it was time for my radio that could pierce the jamming.

“(Sunekosuri. Hey, Sunekosuri. Are you in position?)”

“I am in the factory’s guard room. There are so many surveillance monitors I am starting to feel dizzy.”

This facility was known as a corporate prison, so it would have more cameras installed than a normal factory. I had sent the Sunekosuri there to closely monitor the area I could not approach.

Meanwhile, the silhouettes in the fog continued sending stabbing words back and forth.

I heard a voice I was fairly sure belonged to the female jailer named Sakai Haruka.

“Wait a second! We decided that woman did it!”

“But her car’s burning!”

“Did she kill herself after killing the head jailer? Or maybe there isn’t a body inside. …At any rate, she’s the one behind this! It’s a real problem if she isn’t!!”

Shit, she has some sense.

But that last comment might have been a mistake.

“What? What do you mean it’s a real problem? You make it sound like you have some secret you want to hide by making her look like the murderer.”

“N-no…”

“Shut up!!”

I heard a loud crashing sound. I stared closely and it looked like

Yamada Ken had broken a random car window. He would not have done that barehanded, so he had likely found some kind of blunt weapon on his way here.

“Heh. You were probably the one that did it,” said Yamada. “I know about the head jailer’s ‘preferences’. Once he has his eye on you, it doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. This was a good opportunity for you. In a situation like this, anyone could do it without getting arrested.”

“Don’t mock me! I made sure to stay out of any of that!!” protested Sakai. “And speaking of that, what about you!?”

“Shut the hell up! If I say that’s the truth, then that’s the truth! Did you think we were gonna take a vote? If I break the knees of everyone who’s suspicious, they won’t be able to move!! In that case…!!”

Oh, is Yamada-kun going to give this a real effort?

But the situation suddenly changed.

“Shut! Up!!”

The shy female jailer named Kurumaya Nozomi suddenly stabbed Yamada’s head with a blade.

The action took place beyond the thick fog, so the details were not entirely clear. However, she had likely grabbed one of the shards of the car window and swung it down at Yamada’s head. As Kurumaya Nozomi swung down her clenched fist, something glittered below it.

She swung it down.

Again and again and again.

It was as if she were using some strange stamp.

“Shut up! You’ve done nothing but talk and talk and talk and talk! You’re probably working with that woman to kill us all!! You knew how she was going to escape, so you set up a bomb there!!”

“Gyah!!”

Yamada held his head with both hands, but did not yet collapse. It was not like he was being stabbed with a military knife. But even if he had not yet collapsed, there was probably no saving him. He had

been stabbed quite a bit.

She must have had a lot of anger built up from her everyday life because Kurumaya-chan continued swinging the glass shard down toward Yamada as if she was digging up dirt with a garden spade.

“And!! And!! I’ve never liked you! That annoying voice sounds just like that fucking dog that bit my arm when I was a kid!!”

“Wait, Kurumaya-san!?”

“Shut up!!”

I heard something slice through the air. She had likely swung the shard to keep Sakai Haruka back when the fellow woman tried to approach.

And then…

“Okay, that’s enough,” announced the male jailer named Tanishita Hajime in a decisive tone.

He was answered with a shout of anger from Kurumaya who had likely had the expression of some kind of monster at this point.

“Ah!?”

“No one move. I am with the police. I came here undercover as a jailer to investigate the corporate prison running behind the semiconductor factory. …And by the way, this is no toy.”

Silence fell as the atmosphere froze over.

I could guess that “this” was something one did not often see in Japan.

The effect it brought lasted only a few seconds.

Another voice cut in.

“You’re the one that needs to quiet down, you terrible actor,” spat out a female voice.

It likely belonged to Gogan Sakura, the prisoner in her fifties.

“You’re an industrial spy from Pallax Precision Machinery, aren’t you? Your name is Hayama Jouji. You tried to steal the plans for

the semiconductor printing equipment, but were shocked to find yourself sent to work as a jailer here. You were wondering whether this was a simple reassignment or if your cover had been blown and they were preparing to imprison you here. You had to have been scared."

"Wh-wh-who the hell are you!? What are you talking about!?"

"You're not going to scare me by waving around a model gun. And it doesn't look like you've modified it to shoot real bullets either. A real gun looks like this. Get it now, boy?"

Hm.

There are a lot of interesting people here.

"Thank you for going along with this PSIA undercover investigation. But this is my limit. I was hoping to get a reading on the general intentions of the entire Kuroyama Electronics Group instead of just this out-of-control corporate prison, but I have no choice now that someone has died."

"Y-you're kidding…" said Kurumaya Nozomi in a trembling voice. She had killed someone right in front of a police officer, it was only natural she wanted to deny it. "Th-they said on a drama I watched that the Japanese police aren't allowed to perform undercover investigations! And if they do it's an independent investigative department with a different jurisdiction than the normal police like the Narcotics Control Department!!"

"Officially, yes. But a lot of the PSIA's work does not leave any official records. I've gotten this old while eating food earned from undercover investigations. Shouldn't you assume your ideas about all this were wrong?"

"But…" At this point, the other female prisoner, the high school aged Suzukawa Izumi, spoke up for the first time. "If you're a police officer who leaves no records behind, that means you can have as many illegal side businesses as you like, doesn't it? You leave no trace of anything behind, after all. Are you really an ally of justice here to expose the evils of this corporate prison? Or do you have some other objective more in line with your own desires?"

…*Hm.*

"Ah wah wah wah wah wah!!" shouted the Sunekosuri over the

radio. “I-is it just me or is no one here a normal person!? D-don’t tell me all of them play some role in the underground world Hyakki Yakou deals with…”

“(No, I doubt this is *that convenient.* A few of them live their lives in the light. But my role is to kill anyone necessary regardless of what kind of aftertaste it will leave in my mouth.)”

However, it would be problematic if this (self-proclaimed) PSIA undercover agent took control of the situation.

I could not allow the situation to calm down.

They had to be killing each other until the person behind all this made a mistake.

“Y-you’re lying. That has to be a model gun!”

“Do you think that because yours is just a toy?”

“Freeze!! This is real! So…!!”

“Then how about you prove it?”

This is my chance!!

I brought the radio closer to my lips.

“(Sunekosuri! Who is Gogan Sakura aiming her gun at!?)”

“Eh? Ehh? The Tanishita Hajime guy who might be a police officer or an industrial spy.”

“(Where is he? The thick fog makes it too hard to see from here.)”

“Wh-why do you want to know?”

“Isn’t that obvious?” I pulled out my handgun that had a suppressor equipped. “(I’ll shoot Tanishita Hajime as Gogan Sakura fires her warning shot. An amateur won’t notice the difference in caliber. With one gunshot and one wound, they will suspect Gogan Sakura who had been so well-behaved up until now. The others will fall straight into a panic when they’re betrayed by the person they thought they could trust.)”

“E-eeee!?”

It wasn't clear whether Tanishita Hajime was guilty or not, so I decided it would be best to not make a deadly shot. As long as it caused a panic and they began trying to kill each other, it didn't matter.

"(Sunekosuri, what is Tanishita Hajime's precise location?)"

"Ah, ah wah, ah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah!"

"(Sunekosuri, this is a Hyakki Yakou job! You were sent to support me because the young lady trusts you. If you aren't going to live up to that trust, just quit the organization already!)"

"T-Tanishita is…" began the Sunekosuri. Even over the radio I could tell he was about to cry. "He is to the right from your perspective. He is directly next to the burning car. That is about 10 meters away."

"…?"

"He is standing alongside the side mirror. If you aim based on the reflected light, you should hit his upper body."

This was no time to think.

I followed the Sunekosuri's instructions and aimed my small, suppressor-equipped handgun with both hands.

And then I waited.

"Will a gunshot be enough to prove it? Or do you need the crushed bullet afterwards? I guess you won't believe me until I shoot over there somewhere, will you?"

"Hey, wait…"

I waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

"This is an emergency situation. Waving my gun around like this would normally require more than a written apology, but there aren't going to be any records of this. We use these pretty lightly in our world. Make sure you remember that."

Now!!

I focused on my trigger finger.

And…

A high-pitched gunshot rang out beyond the fog.

Silence followed.

I was hiding a short distance away, but even my ears had a sharp pain in them.

Gogan Sakura had fired a warning shot.

However…

My suppressor-equipped handgun was pointed upwards.

I had held back from firing at the last second.

“(Sunekosuriii…)” I said bitterly.

“Ee!? Wh-what is it? I have no idea what is going on…”

“(You have two options. Either I make an official report to the young lady that you gave me false information to save a suspect, or you will receive a full-body massage by me after all this is over.)”

“I will take the massage! Please, anything but telling Hafuri-sama!! Anything but having those sorrowful eyes turned in my direction!!”

You idiot.

If I had fired in the wrong place, one of them might have noticed the sound or sparks when it hit! That would have ruined everything! This is the sort of “kind noise” that gets professionals killed!!

“(But…)”

What was I to do now?

The warning shot had silenced everyone else. I would have no opportunity to fire randomly into them and it would not cause as much panic this way. For better or for worse, the center of their group mentality was now located in the undercover investigator Gogan Sakura. As their mental dependence on her grew, I would

have to kill someone else to bring in more doubt before it would all come crumbling down.

Gnn! This is a huge detour!!

The undercover investigator seemed to be reestablishing communications beyond the fog.

“There is no hope for this guy…Yamada Ken was it?”

“A-ahh. I…I didn’t…I…wait…”

Kurumaya Nozomi finally began to grow nervous, but Gogan was not going to listen.

“To find the culprit more smoothly, let’s go over each of our situations one by one. We need to find why the head jailer and that female jailer died as well as what is causing the bizarre phenomenon behind it all.”

And then…

Just as I almost began seriously wondering if Gogan Sakura would solve everything for me…

Something even more abnormal came from an unexpected place.

Part 24 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

“Ugh,” groaned the mystery freak after stepping out of the rental car.

What lay before her eyes was an unmaintained forest where the rotting branches of the trees covered the sky and the tall undergrowth left the color of the ground a complete mystery. Nature here was destroying itself like a bedridden old man with bedsores.

“Are you sure we should follow the map? We aren’t going to get stranded are we?”

“The rental car refuses to run, so we can only investigate in the areas we can walk to.”

To be honest, with the almost complete lack of clues, I was beginning to doubt Hasebe Michio was even in Four Mountains.

Finding them after those snake Youkai made me incredibly uneasy, but we had a prisoner’s shoe and an old map of Four Mountains with an X marked on it. It might lead us to nothing, but it was worth trying.

“More importantly, mystery freak, are you sure you’re okay in that swimsuit-like outfit?”

“I can’t exactly take off anything else! B-but if you beg me enough, I might consider stripping further.”

“I mean the opposite, you idiot.” I pointed into the thick greenery we were about to head into. “Do you really want to walk through there with exposed skin? The small branches will scratch at your skin and who knows how many mosquitos and centipedes there are. This is no place for a nice picnic.”

“That’s what the bug spray is for!”

“How much do you think that will really help? And you have moisture all over your body from this fog.”

“Th-then what am I supposed to do?” she asked.

I pointed toward the unmoving rental car.

“The most sensible answer is for you to wait here.”

“No! I can’t send you off alone into a forest that might be filled with Youkai. You’d definitely get your butt kicked and never come back!”

Dammit! I can’t say she’s wrong!!

At the very least, it’s true there were some snake Youkai!!

I rubbed at my bangs with one hand, and half-resignedly stuck my upper body into the rental car’s driver’s seat to unlock the trunk. I checked inside the trunk, but only found a spare tire and a tool set.

Damn. No good.

I had no choice but to toss my jacket over the mystery freak’s head while she wore what basically amounted to a swimsuit.

“Cover yourself with that. It’s better than nothing.”

“U-um, wouldn’t spraying on tons of bug spray help?”

“Using too much will lead to chemical irritation. Remember: this is a chemical that sets off the bugs’ danger sense so they will keep away.”

With that said, I pulled out the largest wrench from the rental car’s tool set. I took the lead, used the tool to sweep aside the underbrush that was over a meter tall, and stomped on through.

Dammit. Making a path is such a pain. I’m obviously wasting three times the energy I would be otherwise.

The mystery freak took advantage of the human bulldozer ahead of her and simply walked through the path I had made.

“Detective, why are you trying to make me fall for you even harder?”

“Would you rather take the lead?”

“There are a lot fewer bugs than you said there would be.”

“The fewer the better.”

…But that does bother me a bit, too.

The thick and extremely grassy smell of greenery filled my lungs, but I could not sense much of an animal smell. I could not spot any animal droppings or remains. It was as if there were no living creatures besides us.

It was as if all of them had suddenly disappeared just like Hasebe Michio and the police officers from the prisoner transport vehicle.

After we walked through the forest a while, the green wall came to an end. A clear area covered in rotting dead grass spread out ahead of us. As we continued on following the map, we found a number of structures made from sharpened logs. They were likely meant to stop cars from entering the area. We passed by them and came across an area with a few run-down shacks made of plywood and galvanized sheet iron and an area with a few large thatch-roof houses with crumbling roofs.

The largest of the houses looked like it would cost between 20 and 30 million yen for the house alone. It would have cost 15 times that had it had been made with Intellectual Village brand name materials and by Intellectual Village craftsmen.

These larger houses seemed out of place with the rest of the abandoned village.

“It doesn’t look like anyone is living in them. It must have been decades since they were abandoned.”

“So this is the rumored Zenmetsu Village,” said the mystery freak as she walked up next to me. “But I see some new footprints here. Look.”

“Whose are those?”

I was suspicious. One set of footprints was large and the other small, but their shape was quite similar. They looked like ready-made leather shoes.

“Maybe it was a couple like us.”

“Okay, no more comments from you.”

The footprints continued in a different direction than the mark on the map. I was curious about both, but I decided to deal with the mark on the map first since we knew we could reach it. Hasebe had not been wearing leather shoes and I doubted he had a woman with him.

“Uuh… Not having internet access makes me even more worried. We only have this hand-drawn map to rely on,” complained the mystery freak.

“We have no choice.”

“Dammit. If only I could contact my usual information broker.”

“I’ll ignore that for now since we’re in the middle of a crisis, but I’m going to keep it in the back of my mind for later.”

I looked down at the map and the mystery freak grabbed onto my shirt with one hand.

“It looks like there’s something around here. A few lines are drawn in.”

“Do you think they represent roads?”

“I don’t know. They don’t travel from the center of the village and outwards, so they might be something else.”

“Like ravines?”

The fog was too thick to see even a few meters ahead. I wanted to avoid making an accidental misstep, so I decided to continue on with caution.

“Where’s the mark on the map?”

“Not far ahead… Oh, is that it?”

The mystery freak pointed toward a vague shadow in the fog.

But…

“It looks like a shrine.”

“You might want to call it a former shrine.”

There was a building, but it had been reduced to nothing but a pile of rubble. Amid the large amount of broken wooden material, pieces that had been scorched black as if in a fire were common. The destruction could not have been natural. This looked like the aftermath of a group swept away by violence rather than the work of a single person. The way the shimenawa and…nusa did you call them? Anyway, that paper folded in zigzags. The way they were blowing in the wind was a bit depressing.

I can tell a shrine was destroyed here, but what does it mean?

There was a mark here on the map in Hasebe’s boot, so there has to be some kind of meaning.

The mystery freak tilted her head.

“Did Hasebe destroy it?”

“If so, why would he mark down its location to remember it?”

“So the shrine was already destroyed.”

“But what does the mark mean?”

“Maybe he had something convenient hidden in the rubble.”

We exchanged a glance.

We moved the rubble as much as we could and finally discovered a clear plastic bag.

It contained some old bundles of money and a rusted blade.

“This looks suspicious.”

“There’s three million yen here,” I muttered. “Huh? But wait. Doesn’t that mean this wasn’t the first time Hasebe Michio has been in Four Mountains?”

That belated thought came to me.

And in the next moment, something heavy struck the back of my head after a full swing.

“Bh…gh…!?”

Pain instantaneously exploded in my head before vanishing as the sense exceeded its limits. Instead, the pain from my neck bending so suddenly stabbed into my mind.

I had been attacked from behind.

By the time I realized that, my vision had been greatly shaken and I had fallen to the side.

Who?

As I lay collapsed on the ground, I desperately tried to focus my shaking vision. My gaze landed on a man of about fifty. He wore a jumpsuit. However, it was a bright neon orange and the back had a prison identification number printed in large letters, so it was not something one saw every day.

It was a prison uniform.

There was only one possible identity for this man swinging up a branch as thick as a human arm.

“Hasebe!?”

The wrench I had used to brush aside the undergrowth had fallen from my grasp during that attack. I kicked at Hasebe Michio’s leg while lying on the ground. He lost his balance but still managed to swing down his blunt weapon. His aim was off, so he only tore up the ground right next to my face.

“Dch!!” groaned Hasebe.

Standing it up and knocking it down once more must have been too troublesome because he placed the thick branch horizontally across my neck and pressed his weight down on it. I frantically grabbed at the thick branch as well, but I was still at a disadvantage. I heard a creaking sound as that branch as thick as an arm crushed my Adam’s apple.

“…Wait. Why…are you…doing this…!?”

I moved my mouth, seeking air.

And then I spotted something that left me in shock.

It was even further above than Hasebe Michio who was leaning down on me. There I saw the mystery freak's face which had become completely expressionless. She held the large wrench I had dropped.

Not good.

Not good! Not good!!

Mystery freak, why are you unhesitatingly coming forward to split Hasebe's head open!?

"Damn…it…!!"

I tried to cry out, but had difficulty producing a voice. I tried to escape from beneath Hasebe, but it did not work well with his weight pressing down on me. I still managed to move bit by bit as if sliding along the ground.

And then gravity seemed to suddenly disappear.

I felt as if I were sliding backwards down a playground slide.

…Didn't the mystery freak mention some lines on the map that might be ravines!?

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

I rolled down to the bottom of the ravine along with Hasebe.

Instead of falling from a vertical wall, it felt more like sliding down a steep slope for three or four meters.

Rather than ground made of earth, a cold, highly-transparent river waited at the bottom.

With a loud splash, I sank into the water headfirst.

Seeking oxygen, I sought the surface almost on instinct alone.

"Buhahh!!"

My head broke the surface. I greedily sucked in oxygen. The river

was only about a meter deep and three meters wide.

Hasebe was…

Where is Hasebe?

As soon as that thought came to mind, someone grabbed the collar of my dress shirt from behind.

I was tugged back by a powerful force and my head sank back under the cold water.

“Gbh! Gbagbhh!!”

Why is Hasebe Michio attacking me?

I had thought the odds were high his request for a retrial would go through and he would be found not guilty of murdering the president of Kuroyama Electronics Group, but it was looking like the charges might not have been false after all.

Or perhaps he had mistaken me for an assassin from the regional police or the corporation.

“Ha…sebe…!!”

I somehow got my head out of the water before it was submerged once more. This repeated a few times.

The situation looked hopeless, but I had been able to manage something during that time.

I had learned where his feet were.

I frantically moved my arm in an attempt to sweep those feet out from under him.

As if our bodies had switched places, our positions suddenly changed. Hasebe fell and his body sank into the cold water.

“Hasebe! Do you understand what you are doing!?”

I grabbed the collar of his prison jumpsuit with both hands and lifted him up.

He was gasping for breath as he dangled down from my arms, but he was smiling.

He looked nothing like a decent citizen who had been wrongly imprisoned for a crime he had not committed.

“To be honest, I had already given up,” said Hasebe as if spitting out the words. “But by some coincidence, I made my way out of the transport bus. And of all places, in Four Mountains where I had hidden some stolen money 30 years ago. I figured there was no harm in trying. Betting on a coincidence isn’t bad at all!!”

“What are you-…?”

“I don’t know if the driver suddenly disappeared or what, but the bus flipped over. The police officers who came running out of their cars also vanished. It was exhilarating. I don’t know who did this or how, but only an idiot wouldn’t take advantage of it!!”

“What are you talking about!?”

As I asked that, I suddenly lost my balance.

Hasebe’s hand was on the end of my necktie.

…Dammit! He kept talking about meaningful things to draw my attention away!!

I frantically tried to remove Hasebe’s hand, but he tugged on my tie before I could. My head sank into the water like a dog on a chain. Even worse, the water was clear enough that I could see Hasebe was stepping on my tie.

He got me…

Now I can’t get my head above water!!

“Gbh…gbhbgh!!”

I struck Hasebe’s leg with my fist and dug my fingers into his shin, but it was no good. I instead began to think about undoing my tie.

Shit, shit, shit!! The knot has soaked up so much water it’s tightened up!!

“Gbh…bghbgh…If you…splash…not…gh.”

Hasebe seemed to be announcing something in triumph above, but I could not hear it well through the water.

It seemed he had more to say.

The air in my lungs tried to force its way out of my mouth in pursuit of an exit. I grew dizzy. My fingers dug into my tie's knot with enough force to almost break my fingernails. I tried to force it looser.

Hurry up.

Hurry up!!

"Gbah!!"

I finally escaped the bonds of my tie and broke the water's surface in search of air.

But two hands pushed my head back down.

Hasebe's face had an odd smile on his dripping wet face. That moisture was more than just the fog.

"Hase…agh…Hasebe!!"

"They should have left it alone. I annihilated everyone like I was supposed to. No one was left. So what does it matter if one last thing hadn't been dealt with!? It wouldn't have caused anyone any problems that I ran away!!"

It sounded more like he was making excuses to himself than he was talking to me.

And then it hit me. An unpleasant feeling ran down my spine.

Zenmetsu Village. That village of annihilation.

The legend concerning that empty village we had seen on the way here.

The psycho killer of the sort that delighted the mystery freak.

"Was it…you? Were you the one that killed this entire village!?"

"Shit! Shit!! Yes, it was. That was under the old system!!" replied Hasebe Michio with a mocking smile as he tried to force my head underwater. He was what you could call the "true culprit". "Calling me a client of the Kuroyama Electronics Group sounds nice, but I was always forced into just barely scraping by. The entire run-down

downtown area was a step away from starvation. Kuroyama wanted to keep a set level of disposable troops to force their inconvenient dirty work onto."

"Kh…!!"

I grabbed the back of Hasebe's hands as he tried to force my head down. I dug my nails deep into them.

Hasebe's expression twisted in pain, but he maintained his position.

Dammit. I can tell my mind is falling toward pessimistic thoughts. By the time I start considering DNA tests and dying messages, it's all over!!

"Are…cough…Are you saying…cough…you attacked the village so the company could profit!?"

Did he think he could win?

Did he think he could silence me?

As Hasebe breathed heavily, he spoke as if encouraging himself.

"I was part of a group. That village was opposed to the construction of the semiconductor factory. I don't know why, but they were strongly opposed to the factory using the underground water. It was a nuisance, so we were ordered to eliminate them and make it look like the work of a crazy killer."

…*How could this be?*

But it was not over yet.

The nightmarish reality continued.

"We were rewarded nicely after finishing the job. For insurance, I hid that in the remains of the village along with what I plundered during the attack. …But I let my guard down. My name had not been removed from the list of disposables! Someone had killed Kuroyama's president during some internal struggle and my name was used. Most likely, some executive who had changed the 'inside' of the semiconductor factory had taken measures before the president could criticise them!!"

"Even if you were innocent of killing the president, you still faced a fate worse than death if the truth came out about Zenmetsu Village during the investigation. Is that why you had to run away before

the retrial!? Because it would look too suspicious if you withdrew the request for a retrial that the victim group was asking for!?"

"Yes…that's right!!"

Hasebe poured even more strength into his arms and my head sank beneath the water.

Gbh!! Dammit… Water is…getting into…some odd places.

I somehow brought my head back above water, but I could not breathe properly due to coughing too much.

"Cough!! Cough cough!!"

"I was cut off in every direction! Kuroyama was too clever. After being kicked out of the United Hive, my factory was completely under their control, but it was only a client on paper. Even if I claimed they ordered me to crush the village after cutting off all ties, no one would believe me. They would think it was a bluff meant aiming for a plea of insanity!! It would never reach Kuroyama! Whether my conviction was found to be wrong or not, I would still be sent down to the very bottom!!"

My fingertips were trembling.

The lack of oxygen must have been finally having direct effects because I could feel my strength fading. The situation was only going to grow worse from here.

Am I really going to be silenced like Hasebe wants?

Dammit.

Isn't there something?

Isn't there anything I can fight back with?

"Running away is the only way I can survive, so of course I'm gonna run! I'll run to the ends of the earth!! I was a victim from the beginning. I was trapped in the system of poverty Kuroyama had created, so I could not escape by any normal means. And now I can't escape without being willing to kill again!!"

Suddenly, I heard something slice through the air. The sound came from directly above me. I did not have time to look toward it because it dropped down in an instant.

A heavy metal wrench thrown from above the ravine struck Hasebe Michio in the head.

That stupid mystery freak!! Do you have any idea how hard I've been working to keep you from dirtying your hands!? And there's no way you could aim properly in this fog. What if you had hit me!?

"Cough cough cough!! Shit!"

But I did not have time to give into my anger.

As strength left Hasebe's arms, I quickly moved away. If I could escape his grasp, I could get out of the water.

As I tried to adjust my position, I saw something unpleasant.

Hasebe Michio had received quite a shock from the blow to the head, but he moved as accurately as an automated factory's robot arm to reach out and grab the wrench that had bounced off his head.

Not good.

Not good!! If he starts beating me with that, I'll have no way of fighting back! If I try to block the blow with my arms, it'll just break my arms. I know various disarming methods based on aikido to aid in arrests, but I don't think any of them will work when I'm in the water and have no footing!!

"Stop, Hasebe."

"I'm sick of hearing about how people are supposed to be good deep down."

"You're well known. You're more than just a criminal. The press is treating you like a hero who was falsely convicted. Your face and name are all over the internet and the talk shows. 150 million people know you! You can never escape. If you kill me here, you will be reported the instant you approach civilization!!"

"When in a flaming building, you head to the roof where the flames have yet to reach despite the danger. If I head back to prison, only the death penalty awaits no matter how the trial goes. Even if I know it's a dead end, I can only continue running away from the wall of flames behind me!! There is no other path left for me!!"

He shouted angrily back at me.

As I saw him raise that heavy wrench, I felt my throat dry up.

Is this it!?

But at that point, I finally realized something.

At some point, another elderly man had approached behind Hasebe Michio. He was horribly dirty and his clothes were nothing more than old rags.

"…I remember you."

"!"

Hasebe turned around in surprise when he heard the other man mutter at him.

However…

"I remember you!!"

A dull sound rang out.

The dirty man held a stone the size of a baby's head that he must have torn from the ravine wall. He swung it down toward Hasebe's head as hard as he could. Blood sprayed out and a bundle of hair was torn off, scalp and all.

A scream burst out.

The dirty man ignored it and slammed the stone down a second and third time.

"Stop…"

I had stood in utter shock for a bit, but the growing color of red brought me back to my senses.

The victor had already been decided. There was no point in going any further.

"Stop!! If you go any further, Hasebe will die!!"

"He…"

The man's arm was trembling.

He gripped the red dyed stone so hard I thought it was going to break.

Even so, he did not stop moving his arm.

He spat out his words while looking down at Hasebe Michio who had half sunken into the cold water.

"He yawned. He was bored. While slaughtering everyone in the village and stabbing a blade into each of the bodies to make sure no survivors were hiding below the corpses, he yawned from boredom!!"

It was a story from a world that defied imagination.

I wanted to believe this was nothing but the man's delusion.

But I had seen it.

This was not some eerie labyrinth. The scenery around us was the completely normal scenery in which dozens of people had lived, eaten, napped, and let their kids run around.

And all of that had been destroyed in a single night.

That was the truth.

"…Who are you?" I asked.

"Someone who they framed for all those murders," replied the rag-wearing man as he dropped the stone in the water and his shoulders moved up and down as he desperately tried to catch his breath. "All this time, I had been so sick of being unjustly called a murderer. But look at this? Now a part of me feels I should become a real murderer. I will become the monster they wanted me to be…"

"You really shouldn't," I said. "Surely you saw that Hasebe Michio's fate will be a miserable one regardless."

"…"

That comment caused the rag-wearing man to look away from Hasebe.

And immediately afterwards, something happened.

“Solved it.”

I heard a voice.

It was a voice with no obvious source. It was as if I were wearing headphones. It was not my voice, Hasebe’s voice, or the rag-wearing man’s voice. It sounded like a small boy’s voice.

“Solved it. Solved it. Solved the puzzle.”

The voice sounded somehow mocking and also like it was singing a creepy lullaby that had some story behind it.

What?

What was that?

Before I could come up with an answer, the decisive moment arrived.

“That means you are no longer needed.”

A soft and unpleasant noise burst out.

It came from Hasebe Michio who had halfway sunken into the cold water while only partially conscious.

His body grew darker.

No, that was not what had happened.

It was dozens if not hundreds of snakes as thick as a little finger. They slithered up from below the water and quickly covered Hasebe Michio’s entire body.

It seemed the man no longer held any will to resist.

He did not cry out or scream.

As that eerie sound continued, that pure black “mass” clearly shrank in volume. The arms and legs sticking out from it turned at odd angles.

Is he being eaten?

That was what my instincts told me, but it made no logical sense.

Snakes ate their prey by swallowing it whole. They had fangs, but they could not bite off flesh. No matter how many snakes as thick as a little finger you had, it should have been impossible for them to eat something the size of a human.

But then what was I watching?

The volume of the mass within was visibly decreasing. It was like watching butter on a frying pan.

“Wait…” muttered the other man. He walked unsteadily toward the mass of snakes. “Please wait! He is…That man is the one murderer who can prove my innocence! Please don’t get rid of him!!”

“Watch out!! I don’t think those are normal snakes! Stay back!!”

I tried to grab the rag-wearing man’s arm, but he jumped at the mass of hundreds of snakes before I could.

He grabbed snake after snake and tossed them away as if digging through dirt to rescue someone who had been buried alive. The snakes must have had some objective or condition because they showed no sign of biting at the rag-wearing man. They focused only on Hasebe.

However…

“Ah…ah…”

The man’s hands stopped moving.

His eyes were opened wide.

The next thing I knew, most of the snakes had vanished as if dissolving into thin air. And in the spot Hasebe Michio had been in were nothing but a single arm and a single leg floating at the water’s surface. A few snakes remained eating them. The limbs shrank and ultimately disappeared. The snakes had eliminated every last trace that the man named Hasebe Michio had been here.

And after Hasebe disappeared, every last snake disappeared as well.

These black snakes were the same as the ones that had appeared in the hood of the rental car. These strange snakes had something like a gold ring around their necks.

“What is going on…?” I muttered blankly while watching as the

rag-wearing man's back drooped.

What had just happened?

What was going on in this village?

Part 25 (Hishigami Mai)

Um, who did what here again?

Kurumaya Nozomi was the one who had repeatedly stabbed Yamada Ken in the head with a glass shard. Sakai Haruka was the one who had cried out to stop her. Tanishita Hajime was the industrial spy desperately bluffing while waving around a toy handgun. Suzukawa Izumi was the young female prisoner. Gogan Sakura was the investigator on an unofficial undercover mission who held a real handgun and was trying to keep the situation from falling into chaos.

The change started with Tanishita Hajime, the industrial spy.

“Uuh…bah…?”

I heard a muffled noise.

That questioning voice sound like it came from a mouth forcibly plugged by a gag.

“Gh..bh. Gfh!? Ghh!! Gbgbh!!”

He suddenly held a hand up to his mouth and he doubled over.

Initially, he looked like the victim of poison.

But that was not the case.

What spewed from his mouth was a large number of snakes.

Snakes as thick as a little finger fell to the ground as if a faucet had been opened. He held a hand to his mouth, but the snakes slipped through the gaps between his fingers.

“Gyah!? Wh-wh-what is that!?”

“What is going on…!?”

The change did not stop at his mouth.

I heard a popping noise. Some foreign substance was flowing out like tears. More than ten snakes came from his eye sockets as if forcing their way out of his eyeballs. They came from his nose and

ears as well. At this point, anyone could imagine what had happened. It was like snakes or moles moving through the dirt. Tanishita Hajime's head had to be filled with countless tunnels. There was no way he was still alive.

"Bh."

I heard another odd noise.

Tanishita collapsed sideways.

This did not look like a living human collapsing. It was more like someone had stood a branch up on its side and then let go.

"Gy-gy-gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!?"

The female jailer named Sakai Haruka let out a high-pitched scream and tried to run away. Who had done this? What had they done? How had they done it? What were the conditions? She did not know the answer to any of those questions, so she was simply trying to run as far away from the dangerous oddity as she could.

Ew.

The stomach of her work uniform swelled up like a beach ball. After that…well, I don't really want to explain it. There was a muffled sound and her entire lower stomach area became dyed a dark red. It was as if a water balloon hidden in her clothes had burst. Dozens of snakes wet with something red slithered out from the gaps in her clothes.

"E-ee!" groaned someone.

That was the limit of what they could do and it changed nothing.

Both the prisoners and the jailers collapsed as they were taken out by the snakes. Gogan Sakura may have held a real gun, but snakes even slithered out of the gun barrel. After her gun malfunctioned and blew her hand off…well, it wasn't pretty.

Silence fell over the area.

The snakes continued to slither around.

I did not think these were some strange parasites or aliens.

They were most likely Youkai.

Snakes. A swarm. A sudden appearance.

There were several candidates, but I could not be sure of anything yet. When it came to snake Youkai, I suspected the rulers of water, the ones related to ironworking which were derived from them, or possessing spirits.

“A-ahh. Ahhhhhhh…”

I heard the Sunekosuri’s dumbfounded cry coming from the radio.

“Sunekosuri, I have no more need for you there, so come meet me here.”

With that arbitrary instruction, I walked through the fog and cautiously approached the corpses.

I was keeping the optimum level of tension and burden on my muscles so I could move at any moment, but there was no sign of the snakes attacking me. It seemed the attack condition was something other than distance.

…*Hmm.*

They were scattered around a bit, but there were six corpses lying in the parking lot. The snakes were even wriggling around in the stab wounds in Yamada Ken’s head. This spread the wounds by quite a bit, so the “contents” were spilling out.

I viewed each corpse in turn.

Yamada Ken.

The worst part was the stab wounds on his head. Instead of fresh blood, over ten snakes were slithering out. The pink contents of his head were spilling out, so it was blatantly obvious there was no saving him.

Sakai Haruka.

I did not want to take a peek inside her work uniform, but her disturbingly sunken-in silhouette told me she had ruptured within it. All of her insides must have been taken out as well because she smelled the worst of any of them. It was more than just the smell of blood. A lot of different things had mixed together inside her gut.

Kurumaya Nozomi.

I heard an occasional whistling sound escaping from her, so I initially thought she was alive. However, she was not. I could see snakes in her chest. Her lungs had burst from the inside. As the snakes came and went, they caused the remnants of her lungs to act as a pump. That was sending some air out.

I saw a beckoning cat bottle cap doll poking out from her pocket, so she must have been the one who had placed them in the employee cafeteria.

Tanishita Hajime.

They came from his mouth, eyes, nose, and ears. Snakes pushed

open every single hole on his face. The structure of his face had been utterly destroyed. It looked like a swollen fugashi.

Suzukawa Izumi.

Large numbers of snakes were coming from her mouth and nose, and her eyes were rolled back into her head. The number of snakes coming from her mouth must have exceeded the limit because her jaw had completely dislocated.

Gogan Sakura.

The explosion of her handgun had blown off her hand and tons of snakes were passing from her right ear to her left. You can imagine what had to have happened to the space between.

“Ahh, how could this happen?” groaned the Sunekosuri as he approached after exiting the factory. “Annihilation…This is a complete annihilation! I thought Hyakki Yakou sent us here to keep this from happening!!”

“What? We were asked to investigate the phenomenon in the semiconductor factory and to eliminate it if necessary. Stop adding on extra objectives.”

“Then if you had been asked to save everyone in the corporate prison, you would have done so!? Are you saying you could have done that with your superhuman abilities!? You could have saved them from this horrible situation!? There had to have been completely normal people with no connection to our world here!!”

“Sorry, but I don’t accept jobs I know I can’t handle.”

You can get emotional if you want, but be careful because it’s only any good for motivation.

And this isn’t over yet.

“Sunekosuri, who do you think did this?”

“Eh…?”

“Is some as yet unseen mystery character hiding somewhere? I suppose it’s possible, but I doubt that’s the case. If someone who could have killed us at any time had been watching from a distance this entire time, they would not have killed them at this time. And

since they did not attack you or me, the culprit must not be viewing us from a god's-eye perspective," I explained. "In other words, this went just as planned. The mental pillar of the group, the head jailer named Itou Takeru, was killed in the cafeteria and then the top suspect, me, was blown up in the parking lot. One of the suspects panicked and used their occult power."

"Then one of them used theses snakes? But they were all annihilated!! Did they lose control of the Youkai!?"

"That would make this simpler, but I don't think so," I said offhandedly. "After all, one of them is still alive."

I cracked the knuckles of my right hand.

My body had been modified to specialize in fighting Youkai, but I could still crush a corpse's head or tear out its heart with a single hand. The human body held more potential for brutality than most people thought.

To put it bluntly, if I thoroughly destroyed each of the suspects' vitals, the incident would be resolved.

"W-w-wait a second!! But…they were…just look…it was a complete slaughter! How…what!?"

"Don't be led astray by the shock of the scene. Look at this rationally. Why did the culprit kill everyone? To keep the conditions equal so as to hide their identity. They wanted to be another victim just in case these irregularly released snake Youkai failed and left a survivor."

"Th-then…"

"That is also why the snake Youkai are still here. Normally, you try to hide your trump card. If someone can determine the identity of the Youkai, they will learn their weakness. But the culprit is keeping these creepy Youkai on the corpses. That is meant to keep anyone from directly touching the victims' bodies to check for a pulse or checking the pupils. When you see these grotesque corpses, of course you aren't going to want to approach the Youkai that did it. Who knows what they'll do to you."

I pointed at each of the collapsed figures in the parking lot one at a time.

Yamada Ken.

Sakai Haruka.

Kurumaya Nozomi.

Tanishita Hajime.

Suzukawa Izumi.

Gogan Sakura.

“There. That’s the one.”

Part 26 (3rd person)

In the Intellectual Village of Noukotsu Village, today was not just another relaxing day in the Jinnai household.

The household ran a sake brewery, so mid-September, which was harvest time for new rice, was the most nerve-racking time. This was the earliest step of the production process, so it determined whether they could make the start dash or not. No matter how much technology they had, a mistake here would prevent them from making the best possible product.

And so Jinnai Shinobu's father was constantly calling the city's rice farmers while Jinnai Shinobu's grandfather drove the electric light truck around to judge and select the rice. The grandfather had supposedly retired, so the importance of this time could be seen in the fact that he stood on the front lines.

However…

The financial issues of human society did not matter to the Youkai who lived for all eternity.

In the name of searching for what Shinobu had hidden in his room, the large-breasted and glamorous Zashiki Warashi found the high school boy's secret savings and the flat-chested and somewhat yandere Yuki Onna checked through his hidden porn magazines. However, they then found something unexpected. (Incidentally, a Youkai that protects the house and a yandere both tend to lack a sense of privacy.)

They found an old album.

"This was made with a service that makes high quality prints of the photos in a digital picture frame. That was popular a while back. … After all, digital data tends to get destroyed every few years."

"Oh, oh, ohh!! S-so this is full of this kind of photo and that kind of photo of Jinnai Shinobu during his younger days? Pant…pant…!!"

"You're starting to look a little damp overall. Are you sure you're not going to melt yourself by getting so fired up over this?"

The Zashiki Warashi and the Yuki Onna brought the album into the

living room and opened the thick cover as casually as if they were reading a manga volume they had found while cleaning the room.

“This is Shinobu back when he refused to let go of his baby bottle.”

“…What’s this!? His hair is a different color!!”

“And this is Shinobu when he became a wild animal and leapt toward my breasts even when I tried to tell him his bottle was over there.”

“That damn gigolo! He had that much talent that young!?”

A Nekomata muttered in shock a bit away from the two trembling Youkai.

“What are they doing…?”

She had been speaking to herself, but someone replied to her.

It was Jinnai Shinobu’s mother who preferred dealing with the accounting over actually making the sake. As she rapidly entered data into a spreadsheet program on the computer placed atop the low sitting room table, she spoke leisurely to the Nekomata.

“It can’t really be helped. Half of Shinobu’s problems with the Zashiki Warashi are his own fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her laziness and her love of video games come from Shinobu’s own actions.”

This woman was not a frugal person who was stingy with money. Instead, she was a math fanatic who grew utterly absorbed in the fluctuations of the parameters. She grinned at the spreadsheet on the screen as she spoke.

“In fact, when I married into the family, that Zashiki Warashi almost never appeared where anyone could see her.”

“…Really?”

“That’s the standard for a Zashiki Warashi, right? You would see her shadow on the sliding door but would find no one there if you circled around behind it. If you left food in the altar room, it would mysteriously disappear.” The Nekomata looked dubious as Jinnai

Shinobu's mother continued speaking. Her fingers raced across the keyboard all the while. "When Shinobu was born, she was still that elusive and eerie existence. However, Shinobu would excitedly go around searching for the Zashiki Warashi. When he was unable to find her he would grow tired and begin to cry. That's when we began to see her face poking out from behind a pillar. After that continued long enough, she ended up like this."

"It might be a bit too cruel to lay all the blame on that boy."

"Probably. Shinobu also gained some habits from her. For example, he always embraces his pillow or something while sleeping."

A smartphone then began ringing.

It was the phone (that actually belonged to Shinobu) which was placed in the chest of the glamorous Zashiki Warashi's yukata.

"What? You left on your trip but ended up stranded with a girl from your class? Shinobu, why are you calling? Are you bragging about how great your life is?"

"A-a rendezvous!? Don't tell me they're trapped in a mountain cabin and have to strip down naked to warm each other with their bodies!! Th-that is the role that a Yuki Onna should play as mountains and coldness are our domain!"

"I thought seeing a Yuki Onna approaching in that situation led to being stranded and freezing to death," pointed out Shinobu over the phone. "But that's not the point. Anyway, we've already contacted the fire department, so we should be okay. In the meantime, I have a few photos to send you."

"Are they erotic photos overflowing with youth?"

“M-making a fish print with the female body!? How twisted!!”

“Hey, could we try to get somewhere in this conversation?” asked Shinobu. “We found a bunch of old kanji and can’t read them. I thought maybe a Youkai who had lived a long life might be able to decipher them.”

“Shinobu, that sounds like a huge pain.”

“Once I hang up, I can call the card company and tell them I lost my credit card. If I do that, the smartphone, the game system’s network play, and the laptop’s internet will all be stopped. And what about the cable TV? I think the ones in my room and your

room are both under my name.”

The Nekomata sighed in exasperation when she saw the glamorous Zashiki Warashi prostrate herself in front of the smart phone with tears in her eyes.

The Zashiki Warashi gave a teary sniff and looked through the photographs she had been sent.

“Um… I think this one carved into a stone in what looks like a cave says…‘arrival of the water god’.”

“Any idea what that means?”

“It means they are bringing a snake Youkai in from somewhere else.”

“…Snake?”

With the obvious example of Yamata no Orochi, snake or serpent Youkai were often related to twisting rivers and the water damages that came from them.

“Then those are…no wait. I didn’t get that feeling from them. It’s the huge serpents like Orochi or Uwabami that symbolize rivers. The ones I saw were different…”

Shinobu was muttering about something, but the Zashiki Warashi did not pay too much attention because she did not know the details.

She focused on deciphering the old writing in the photos so she could end the danger of an internet annihilation.

“These few account books on Japanese paper seem to be related to a village ritual. They explain the cave. However, the paper is so damaged I can only read bits and pieces.”

“Just tell me what you can read.”

“The village’s source of income came from gold dust collected in a river at the bottom of a ravine. There must have been a gold mine somewhere, but they did not have the technology to search for it or mine it.”

“…I was wondering how that man bought that portable stove and gas cylinder.”

“However, the amount of gold dust they could get was unstable. During years in which they found less, they did not earn enough to live off of which affected the stability of the village’s entire society. They had a common ritual they would use to resolve their worries.”

“A ritual?”

“You could call it ‘thinning the herd’ or ‘leaving fewer mouths to feed’. The ritual was performed by taking any baby born during one of those difficult years and drowning it in the spring in that cave. … Simply put, they would leave fewer people to help resolve the lack of food.”

Silence fell.

This was not a problem with the signal.

Shinobu did not know how to respond to this information that went well beyond what he had expected.

“From the format of this writing, this is something that happened over 100 years ago,” pointed out the Zashiki Warashi.

“Not necessarily,” groaned Shinobu. “There were two graveyards in the village. That’s probably because they had one for the normal villagers and one for the babies that had been killed in the ritual. Thirty years ago was the age of color television!”

No matter what anyone said or how they tried to deny it, what had happened would not change.

Occasionally, that village that seemed frozen in time would not have enough food.

To resolve that, they had continued to drown babies as if it was perfectly normal.

Even as televisions moved from black and white to color, even as bullet trains rushed around Japan, and even as air conditioners became a part of the standard household, it had continued. As if insisting that remaining unchanged was a virtue, they had continued to drown babies.

And if someone had not annihilated everyone living there, it would likely still be happening.

The victims of the incident had been human.

But there was no guarantee that they were all “perfectly innocent”.

“This is the last one. The Japanese paper you found next to a broken jar. …Hm. This must be the snake Youkai you saw in the village.”

“What is it?”

If it was a giant serpent symbolizing rivers, it would be the Orochi or the Uwabami.

But that was not it.

The Zashiki Warashi replied as if teaching a young child how to read a difficult kanji.

“Toubyou. It is a possessing spirit that comes as a set of 75 small snakes.”

Part 27 (Hishigami Mai)

Yamada Ken, Sakai Haruka, Kurumaya Nozomi, Tanishita Hajime, Suzukawa Izumi, and Gogan Sakura.

“There. That’s the one,” I spat out as I swung my arm forcefully down.

I aimed for the culprit’s head.

But I missed.

My right hand smashed into the parking lot asphalt up to the wrist. The culprit who had been pretending to be dead had rolled to the side to avoid my arm.

“Tch. You idiot!!”

What the hell!? Why did my hand pierce the asphalt so easily!?

My body was specialized for anti-Youkai combat. If I forced myself to take on a metal panel or asphalt, I would smash my own flesh to pieces.

“Ah…ah…”

As the Sunekosuri let out a dumbfounded voice, I pulled my arm out of the smashed asphalt.

It seemed my attack had not been completely wasted.

A torn-off ear hung down from my index finger.

“How…? But…she was…she was dead just a moment ago!”

“You dumbass. This wasn’t like Yamada-kun’s split head with the brains leaking out or Sakai-chan’s gut that ruptured like a water balloon. If you had paid attention, it should have been obvious.”

I threw away the ear as the figure stared at me and slowly stood up.

The piece of flesh struck the culprit in the chest where it slid down in accordance with gravity.

“Having so many snakes coming from your mouth that your jaw

dislocates isn't enough to kill you. If the snakes were only in your mouth and had not entered your throat or organs, you could continue breathing through your nose," I said to the culprit. "Isn't that right, Suzukawa Izumi-chan?"

She was about high school age. As one of the prisoners in the corporate prison, she had been forced to wear unrefined workwear. Or so it had seemed.

However, the Sunekosuri was trembling and said, "Wh-what is that?"

"Don't ask me."

"Why is that girl's skin peeling off to reveal an old woman's face!? Who is she!?"

"Why don't you ask her?" I replied offhandedly before smiling. "But the kind of person that disguises themselves as a beautiful girl tends not to be a decent person in reality."

Suzukawa Izumi, or the old woman wearing her skin, spoke in a hoarse voice with her face half destroyed.

"…Is that so?"

"There was a rumor of a free pass in the corporate prison and alcohol would occasionally find its way in. Whether the person using the free pass was a prisoner or a jailer, they were part of a group that wanted to destroy the corporate prison and they were using the alcohol as currency to negotiate and make deals with people. That way they could gather the items they needed for a Youkai or Package. …That was our theory so far, but it looks like the situation was actually a bit different."

"Eh? …Oh, I get it! If that old woman could disguise herself as Suzukawa Izumi…!!"

"She could disguise herself as other people too. A single person was using the free pass the entire time. By periodically faking her death and taking over someone else's face, she could continue taking action while escaping suspicion."

"…"

"I don't know how many people are cooperating with her outside

the factory, but if she wanted to periodically leave, she must have had some equipment to make periodic contact. Maybe a server that uses a satellite to communicate. And it would of course work on a band that gets past the jammers."

The old woman said nothing more.

In the very next moment, a great number of small snakes unnaturally slithered out from within the fog.

Dozens of them appeared only a few centimeters from my face. I instinctually took a step back and gravity dragged the snakes down to the parking lot asphalt.

The old woman looked confused.

"Is it that surprising?" I asked with a scornful laugh. "The snakes all came from within the others' bodies and wounds. The medium is likely the fog. When the victim breathes it in, you can call the snakes into their body to kill them."

"…Then there should be no way for you to avoid it."

"How naïve. You shouldn't think of me as having the same standards as the other creatures we call humans. I am extraordinarily powerful against Youkai and the like. *I even have the ability to bite off Youkai flesh and digest it in my stomach.* Once they're inside my body, there's nothing they can do. I can even purify all of this fog that reeks of Youkai." And I did not stop there. "A normal human cannot kill a normal Youkai, but the same cannot be said when it is Youkai versus Youkai. That is why people in my business like to use Shikigami. Sunekosuri! If you don't want to die, bite apart all of the snakes appearing in your mouth!!"

Unpleasant noises began coming from the Sunekosuri's mouth.

A Sunekosuri was a Youkai without a violent side. All it could do was rub its head up against travelers' legs.

However, these snake Youkai were only as thick as a little finger and thirty centimeters long.

Speaking purely about size and ignoring their strength and special characteristics, they were like slightly hard sausages. That meant a small dog's teeth were enough to tear them apart.

“Ueh, uehhh!! Peh, peh! I-I hate creatures without legs! Woof woof!! Ubh!? Gehhhh!! Ow!! What is this ring!? Why is there metal mixed in with them!?”

He seemed to be having it tough since more snakes would appear every time he breathed in the fog.

He was continually biting them and spitting them out, so he did not seem in danger of having his stomach burst. I decided I could safely focus on the old woman.

“Since this was a snake Youkai related to the water in the fog, I assumed it was an Orochi or Uwabami, but it seems I was a bit off.” I got to the heart of the issue as I glanced over at the gold ring-like objects the teary-eyed Sunekosuri was spitting out. “The Toubyou. If I recall, it is a Youkai raised in a jar or pot that comes in a set of 75. In exchange for periodically giving them sake or a rice ball, they allow the master of the home to prosper by stealing gold, silver, and treasure from other houses. They are a stereotypical possessing spirit. …That must have been the characteristic used to make the 8000 people from the corporate prison vanish…no, to make the few of us here go missing. *This Package automatically “steals” the people needed for the master’s objective. That produces this spirited away effect.*”

“…You do not understand.”

“What don’t I understand?”

“The Youkai I wanted to use was not a possessing spirit!!”

She must have learned she could not directly target me from within, so the arrangement of the Toubyou changed.

Dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of snakes rained down around the old woman. They coiled around each other, bit into each other, became strongly intertwined, and branched off complexly. All together, they created a giant serpentine silhouette.

Wait. Wait just a second.

“You mixed in the characteristics of the Orochi!? Dammit. I should have investigated the abandoned village!!”

“This is closer to the form of the Youkai that should have been in the village. But your regrets are meaningless. My shrine was

destroyed long ago. There is nothing left."

"So 'Suzukawa Izumi' was the survivor of Zenmetsu Village rumored to exist within the corporate prison."

"How long ago do you think I am a survivor from?" spoke the old woman in a whisper with her back to the giant branching snake. "Would you believe me if I said I have been this old woman for over 100 years?"

"I see no reason not to. I have remade and swapped out everything from my fingertips to my internal organs, so it doesn't surprise me you can alter yourself like that. I don't really see the point, though."

"The Four Mountains village was created over 100 years ago as a treatment facility for those suffering from spiritual injuries or other serious harm related to Youkai. Although in reality, it was mostly a quarantine area people were abandoned in."

"Is there any need to explain this?"

"My objective was to enter the Four Mountains village, intentionally split the group so two powerful families were created, and maintain a constant state of internal conflict. Essentially, I was a spy meant to control Four Mountains. By taking the hatred pointed outwards and turning it inwards, the residents would not try to breach the walls of the village. If all went well, they would be satisfied with their extremely small cycle and extremely small society."

"…Was that really necessary?"

"But the gold dust in the river gave them the foreign currency they need to contact the outside world. Then when the possessing spirits were brought in, they decided to spiritually arm themselves. That was 30 years ago. This caused the Kuroyama Electronics Group to view them as dangerous. The child drowning going on at the time left the underground water impure, so it was banned for anyone to drink it. Due to the timing, this intensified their opposition of the corporation that wished to use that underground water for the semiconductor factory."

It happened as I tried to make a surprise attack during a pause in the conversation.

“That was why the Kuroyama Electronics Group planned to take the initiative and annihilate the Four Mountains village.”

The old woman’s hand moved.

“They had yet to complete the Toubyou Package that covered the entire Four Mountains area. It was left behind unfinished.”

She held a container filled with water, sake, or some other liquid. She buried that hand in the branching Orochi behind her.

“That is why I overwrote the Toubyou Package with the Youkai and ritual that village was originally meant to have.”

And she pulled her hand back out.

As if that were their cue, the giant serpent all too easily scattered apart.

“Originally, the serpent was nothing more than the scabbard.”

The old woman held a sword in her hand.

Instead of a single-edged katana, it was a double-edged sword from an older era.

The old woman spoke quietly as she casually lowered that sword that emitted a brilliant light as if it were shining in the sun.

“Its true nature is the production of a sword. The name of the sword that appeared after the defeat of a serpent branching into eight was Kusanagi.”

…Not good!!!

She seriously has the ability to illegally access and forcefully draw out the power of one of the Three Sacred Treasures by following the diagram of defeating Yamata no Orochi!? This has gone well outside the realm of anti-Youkai!!

By the time I realized I had completely misinterpreted how much distance I needed from her, the situation had already begun to move.

A fearsome slash assaulted me like a flash of lightning.

Part 28 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

As I watched on, Hasebe Michio, a man deeply involved in the past slaughter of Zenmetsu Village, was eaten by a great number of snake Youkai.

The mysteries had only grown, but remaining there would not have helped.

I grabbed the arm of the rag-wearing man who seemed to be a survivor of Zenmetsu Village and urged him to get out of the ravine river and up onto land.

The cliff was only a few meters tall and it was not completely vertical.

There were uneven protrusions sticking out that we could grab or use as footing, so an amateur could easily climb up in exchange for further muddying our clothes.

“Are you okay?” asked the mystery freak once I had crawled up.

I lay collapsed on the ground catching my breath as I answered.

“Hasebe was devoured by snakes.”

“I can only imagine that is a figurative description, so could you be more specific?”

“I mean it literally! They were in the rental car’s hood too, remember? It was those small snake Youkai. A group of them suddenly attacked Hasebe!!”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” muttered the other man blankly. His entire body was trembling. “Those Youkai aren’t dangerous like that! They don’t indiscriminately attack people and cause them to vanish like a Tengu does…”

“We don’t even know your name!” I said to cut him off. “Who are you!? You didn’t call out to Hasebe or me. You called out to those snake Youkai. You told them to stop. Do you know something about them!?”

“Those are…” The rag-wearing man trailed off, but nervously

continued. “They are a possessing spirit known as a Toubyou. In the past, the more influential members of the village bought them from a merchant in the Shikoku area… We managed somehow by gathering gold dust, but this small village was so cut off from the outside world that it had no stable source of food. It did not even have electricity or phone lines. It was cut off and kept at a distance! And so…”

“You borrowed the power of a possessing spirit Youkai that could steal whatever you needed from others’ houses?” said the mystery freak, finishing the man’s sentence for him.

The man averted his gaze a bit.

“The annihilation befell the village just before the Package was completed. It shouldn’t have been functioning, but it seems a preliminary framework of the Assembly was in place. That is why those snakes will listen to what I say to a certain extent. If I periodically give them rice balls and sake, that is. I just need the pot and stove to cook the rice.”

To a certain extent.

That may have been the payment for leaving the framework abandoned.

Borrowing the Youkai’s power may have been convenient, but it was like crossing a completely unmaintained suspension bridge day in and day out.

It might be fine today.

But what about tomorrow? What about the day after? What about a month from now or a year from now?

Wouldn’t your foot eventually break through a damaged board?

“Toubyou are raised in earthen jars or pots, right?”

“Yes. But getting the Toubyou to take root in Four Mountains would have been all for naught if an outsider who hated us or a traitor among us broke the jar. That is why a larger framework was prepared in addition to the jars underneath the houses.”

“…?”

“Four Mountains itself. In other words, *a large area of land that is surrounded by mountains.* The assembly of the Package was adjusted so that would function as the ‘jar’ the Toubyou live in. But this project was put together by the rich influential group, so I do not know the details.”

An unpleasant feeling raced up my spine.

That meant the entire basin area functioned as the snakes’ territory.

And the snakes had the ability to steal whatever items their master wished from the world outside that giant “jar”.

It was as if we had been hiding within the beast’s den. No matter how hard we tried to escape, those Youkai would easily capture us. And even if we did escape their den, our safety was not guaranteed. The Toubyou was a Youkai that travelled outside its jar to steal various items.

“Whatever the case, I think we can assume those Toubyou are deeply related to this incident.”

“By the way, detective, what are you going to do about Hasebe Michio? Will the police accept ‘he suddenly disappeared due to a Youkai’s power’ as an answer?”

“My head hurts… Well, we found that bag with a rusted blade and some money in it. I just have to use that to prove Hasebe was involved in the attack on Zenmetsu Village.”

“The Toubyou is also a Youkai that causes illnesses in those obstructing the prosperity of its house,” said the rag-wearing man almost in a groan. “But they are not powerful enough to kill. What was that we saw…? I’ve never seen the Toubyou do that before…”

“At any rate, I want you to come with us. Cases involving Youkai can be difficult to handle, but I need you to write an affidavit.”

Under current law, Youkai could not be judged directly. Or rather, locking them up had little meaning when they had no lifespan, and there was no way to execute them since they could not be killed.

And so…

This man had been built into the Toubyou Package and held the authority to control it, so it was possible he should be viewed as the

culprit behind Hasebe's disappearance (or murder).

However, that man had shouted for the Toubyou to stop while they were devouring Hasebe.

I simply had to hope that would be considered in the courtroom.

"No…"

The man uttered a word of refusal.

The mystery freak frowned and all of my muscles tensed slightly. I slowly sat up from where I had been lying exhausted on the ground.

Is he going to run off in fear of being arrested?

I grew cautious, but the situation went well beyond my expectations.

"It seems I have already reached my limit."

For an instant, I could not grasp what he meant.

But shortly thereafter…

"Solved it. Solved it. Solved the puzzle."

That creepy lullaby voice returned.

When I looked back at the rag-wearing man, his expression was crumpled into something that looked like a smile yet also looked like he was crying.

And when I lowered my gaze, I saw what looked like wriggling black ropes mixed in with the dead grass. They had wrapped solidly around both his ankles.

Those aren't ropes.

They're snakes!?

"That means you are no longer needed."

It was as if giant crocodile jaws grew out from the ground and swallowed the man.

A mass made up of dozens if not hundreds of snakes assaulted him.

Part 29 (Hishigami Mai)

A stick-like object spun through the air as it flew in an arc.

It spun and spun.

Yes.

I still felt no pain, but I could tell. That spinning object was my right arm. That spinning arm had been mercilessly severed at the shoulder.

Immediately afterwards, I kicked the Sunekosuri up into the air and caught him in my left hand. I forcefully bit into the right arm spinning through the air to grab ahold of it.

I then recalled the layout of the semiconductor factory and ran with all my might toward its emergency exit.

I heard a great crash.

God dammit!

I seemed to have misjudged my strength due to the tension. I pulled my ankle out from where it had smashed into the parking lot asphalt and then I continued running.

In the meantime…

"…"

The old woman swung Kusanagi three times.

Three meter long slices appeared in the surrounding fog and equal slices appeared in the neatly lined up vehicles. Several explosions soon followed. I swung my upper body around to avoid it while charging with the speed of an artillery shell toward the factory's emergency exit that I could see clearly through the slices in the fog.

I ran into the steel door shoulder first.

The two hinges and the deadbolt broke simultaneously, the door bent into a V-shape, and I rolled into the factory.

Before I stood back up, I spat the right arm out of my mouth and

onto the floor.

“Gh…!! Pant, pant… Dammit. That damn old woman!!”

“A-are you okay!?”

“My body has been thoroughly modified. The wound hasn’t started to rot yet, so I can reconnect it with my kit.”

A cold sweat covered my body.

Dammit. How could a man-made object catch up to my bodily control!?

“But that kit is in the trunk of our car. As long as that old woman is out there, heading out to the parking lot is suicide.”

“C-can’t you run out there while evading like before?”

“*Do you really think I was evading that?*”

Uuh… This feels terrible.

It’s because monsters like this sometimes appear with no warning that you can’t take this business lightly.

“I’ve been sliced up good. I didn’t dodge even one of them. *It’s just that the cuts were so sharp the damage hasn’t caught up yet.* If I don’t do anything, my entire body will fall apart into tiny blocks within 10 minutes.”

If that happened, there was no saving me.

To survive, I would need to finish things with the old woman and retrieve my kit from the trunk of the car in the parking lot all within the time limit.

To be honest, the situation was not good.

“Wh-what? Then…is there…anything I can do!?”

“Don’t panic. The situation may be bad, but it isn’t impossible.”

The worst possibility was the old woman hiding. If she simply waited for me to come out into the foggy parking lot, the 10 minute time limit would be over in no time.

But I was certain that would not happen.

My body may have been sliced to pieces, but I had protected the Sunekosuri.

The old woman would actively attack in order to finish off that cute canine Youkai.

However, I left that unsaid as I continued the conversation.

“Well, fortunately this is a cutting edge semiconductor factory.”

“Eh? Oh, I get it! That old woman is using the fog. This factory is perfectly sealed off and sterilized!!”

“Now that she’s drawn out Kusanagi, I don’t think she needs the fog.”

“Then…”

“Just come with me. We’re going further in.”

I grabbed my severed right arm with my bloody left hand and walked further into the factory with the Sunekosuri close behind me. The production line visible beyond thick glass was made up of nothing but conveyer belts and various robot arms. It seemed to truly be an automated factory. It was a bit surreal to see it still pumping out products like normal despite the situation. Even if humanity was wiped out, it would likely continue making electronic parts no one would use.

“To get to the production line, we have to pass through two layers of doors for the sterilization process… Sunekosuri, will a rural-loving Youkai like you be okay surrounded by so much precise machinery?”

“Not really, but I doubt you’ll listen if I complain.”

Good enough.

We entered the sterilization room between the two layers of doors. A warning sign warned of flammability, so it likely used an ethanol spray and ultraviolet light for quick drying.

You were meant to wear a spacesuit-like outfit when entering, but this was no time to worry about that.

I ignored the error message on the control panel and kicked open the second door. I then stepped into the production line area that

was so clean that every form of life was killed down to the microscopic level.

“Wh-what are you going to do here?” asked the Sunekosuri.

The area was large, but it had so much production machinery that it felt like a labyrinth.

“That old woman’s Kusanagi sliced right through all of the cars in the parking lot. I doubt anything in this labyrinth will protect us,” he continued.

“I know that. In fact, you shouldn’t even be thinking about standing up to Kusanagi which is linked to Yamata no Orochi. Our power is only effective against Youkai and things derived from Youkai. We can’t defeat an ability that enters the realm of the gods like the Three Sacred Treasures.”

I glanced around the production line and noted the positions of a few thick pipes.

“But even if that old woman primarily uses the Orochi, it’s still affected by the Toubyou. …And that’s just a Youkai. That power falls within our world, so we can stand up to it.”

“So you are going to fight back using the characteristics of the Toubyou?”

“Exactly.”

I was a Hishigami woman. Thanks to the ridiculous superstition that we invited in misfortune, we were detested by our great Zaibatsu family that was passed down the male family line and was well-known around the world. In other words, the women born to the Hishigami family could not continue on without possessing specialized skills and characteristics that allowed them to battle an entire Zaibatsu on their own. And for me, those skills had been honed in actual battle.

Did you think you were the only special one around, old woman?

“Just like the fox or dog Youkai, the Toubyou is a stereotypical possessing spirit. They will attach to and cause illness in those who get in the way of their house’s prosperity, and they will steal valuables from other houses to help their house prosper. And they will spread to a spouse’s house if you get married.”

“While raised, they are put in earthen pots and jars and are periodically given rice balls and sake. And the one common rule among almost all possessing spirits is…”

I trailed off.

The giant semiconductor factory had been sliced diagonally.

The walls were sliced.

The production line was sliced.

The two layers of doors for sterilization, the conveyer belts, the robot arms, the thick metal pipes, the electronic control system, the lights, the floor, the ceiling, the tempered glass, and everything else were all sliced. Kusanagi had cut down everything like mowing over grass.

My upper body had been sliced through again, but that no longer mattered. As long as I could retrieve the kit from the rental car’s trunk within the time limit, I would manage.

The difference in speed between the factory falling apart and my body falling apart was due to the moisture and oils along the slices of my body holding everything together somewhat. Not that the reason mattered so long as I could move.

Thanks to the sliced pipes, a clear liquid began spraying across the production line area.

A single figure stepped forward amid it all.

It was the old woman with Kusanagi hanging from her right hand.

“What are you after?” she asked.

“What would you do if I told you?”

“Is it the ethanol for sterilization? If you ignite it, you can likely envelop me in flames, but you underestimate me if you think that will kill me.”

“True. For one thing, the name Kusanagi comes from it being used to cut down flaming grass to escape harm. It would be difficult to kill you that way.”

I heard a splashing sound.

It was the sound of the old woman stepping forward.

The liquid flowing from a severed metal pipe had already spread out across the floor of the production line.

“What did you want to do here so badly that you were willing to switch faces constantly?”

“I had to correct a mistake.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It does not matter if you do not understand,” said the old woman as she wiped off her face with a hand.

The liquid pouring down from above must have bothered here.

She then said, “Let us finish this.”

“Not a bad suggestion.” I shrugged. “*But it is already over.*”

“…?”

For an instant – just an instant – the old woman looked truly confused.

And then…

She realized it.

“…You swallowed some, didn’t you?”

“Wait… This water. Is this the pure water used in the semiconductor factory? Wait, but that means…!”

“It is the underground water from the Four Mountains area. …I didn’t do too much research concerning Zenmetsu Village, but the villagers and the corporation were arguing over the use of the banned underground water, right?”

The old woman was not listening.

She brought a hand to her mouth and frantically tried to spit out the underground water that had entered her body.

Instead of water, a great amount of small snakes came from her mouth.

“Gh…bh…!?”

The sounds coming from her mouth were no longer words.

The snakes had clearly left her control as more and more slithered out.

“Wh-what is going on…?” asked the Sunekosuri while looking flustered.

“The Toubyou are a possessing spirit Youkai that protects its house. But a lot about how the Toubyou distinguished between someone of Four Mountains and an outsider is actually still a bit of a mystery. After all, it seems Zenmetsu Village was a group brought in from outside to quarantine them. And yet the Toubyou were able to distinguish between their family and outsiders. That means they must have used some distinguishing factor.” I raised my index finger. “Was it the people who gave them rice? Was it any baby born in the village? Were the people bound to the Youkai in some sort of ceremony? …But that raises questions about a certain incident. Why were the residents of Four Mountains living in Zenmetsu Village so opposed to the semiconductor factory being built? Or more accurately, why did they refuse to allow it to use the underground water?”

“Y-you don’t mean…”

“It was who drank the underground water of Four Mountains. …I think that was what was used to distinguish between the Toubyou’s ‘family’ and ‘outsiders’.” I then pointed my raised finger at the old woman who was suffering as she coughed up more and more snakes. “A standard characteristic of all possessing spirits is that they will provide some form of benefit if used correctly but will bare their fangs at their own master if used incorrectly, used without respect, or used cruelly. This old woman focused more on the Orochi than the Toubyou, so she tried to eliminate as much of the Toubyou side from within her as she could. In other words, she treated it cruelly. …She had likely been careful not to drink any of the underground water so that she would be deemed an outsider despite being a resident of Four Mountains.”

“And the village’s underground water was used for the semiconductor factory’s pure water?” muttered the Sunekosuri blankly. “B-but! Doesn’t that mean everyone in the factory could have used the Toubyou? They were using Four Mountains’

underground water like it was normal.”

“No. The underground water is the foundation of the semiconductor production. It wasn’t used for the standard water. You saw that water server in the employee cafeteria, right? The jailers obviously used it, but they did not get angry when the prisoners used it too. The prisoners here have no human rights, so the use of water brought in from elsewhere must have been the rule here.”

“Cough…cough!!”

I heard the old woman repeatedly try to clear her throat, but it was too late.

She could not defeat the Toubyou unless she was prepared to cut open her own stomach with Kusanagi.

“By drinking the underground water, you are now considered the master of the Toubyou. And due to your continued use of Kusanagi which denies the existence of the Toubyou, they have bared their fangs against you as a master who treats them cruelly. … Unfortunately for you, your fate has already been sealed. There is no saving you now.”

“Th-this is why…I was…cough…opposed to using…possessing spirits…” replied the old woman through all the snakes. And, “So prepare yourself… With no one left to control it…gh…the Package will spread damage around…uncontrollably. It will now possess such power…that you can only call it inexhaustible…”

“…Are you saying the Toubyou and Orochi are not done for yet?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” The old woman whose name I still did not know smiled. “Those were not the Youkai…I originally wanted to control…”

A sticky sound drowned out everything else.

The woman collapsed to the ground and the snakes slithering from her mouth enveloped her body. The Sunekosuri let out a frightened cry. As we watched, that lump made up of hundreds of snakes gradually shrank.

Eventually, every single snake disappeared, leaving nothing behind.

Not even the old woman’s body remained.

Part 30 (Jinnai Shinobu)

To be honest, there was nothing left for us to do once we contacted the fire department.

We only had to wait for rescue to arrive.

…Or so it should have been.

“Dammit…”

“Shinobu-kun, are you okay?” asked Madoka as she peered over at me.

I was unable to provide a proper response.

My thoughts were on what had happened decades ago.

There was a collection of small villages made up of small shacks reinforced with plywood and galvanized sheet iron. In addition, there was a group of larger houses surrounding a cave. The events had occurred in that now-abandoned village.

They had regularly committed infanticide to ensure they had enough to eat. In the twisted tiny society of that village, no one had questioned it. Not only would they selfishly kill them, but they had cruelly kept their graves separate.

The information revealed by the Zashiki Warashi was too heavy for a high school boy born in this age.

“…That’s insane,” I muttered without thinking.

I felt something heavy in the bottom of my gut like when I took a nap directly after eating instant ramen. It had been there since I had learned that information and I could not imagine how long it would stick around. It was possible it would be there for the rest of my life.

“You were not directly involved in this, Shinobu-kun.”

“I know that.”

“And the tradition ended decades ago.”

“I know that too”

Madoka was speaking so indifferently it was possible the information was already nothing more than an entry on a list of dates for her.

“And no matter how much it bothers you, is there anything we can do? If not, worrying about it is meaningless.”

“…Perhaps.”

I felt some distance between myself and this financial monster who could convert anything into numbers and handle it dryly. When I had given into my anger and beaten down that middle-aged man, she had looked at me with such cold eyes.

However…

It was true there was nothing I could do.

It sounded coldhearted, but it was the truth.

“…The rescue team sure is taking its time.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You often hear that it’s best not to move around at times like this, but…”

“What do we do if they just leave us here, Shinobu-kun? Can you tell the difference between edible mountain plants and inedible ones?”

“An Intellectual Village is a carefully-maintained artificial natural environment. Don’t look to me for actual survival skills.”

I recalled there being an “edible plant app” that analyzed a photo of the plant in question, but my smartphone was currently in the Zashiki Warashi’s cleavage. I could always send the photos to her to analyze, but I had also remembered seeing reviews saying its results could be unclear due to shadows in the photo.

And as someone who had always had his parents cook for him, I wouldn’t know what to do even if I was handed a bunch of edible mountain plants. We would probably end up eating half-cooked grass.

“If it comes down to it, we might have to rely on the human ability to survive for a while on water alone.”

“Geh. Isn’t that not actually true? I think you at least need some salt and minerals…”

Suddenly…

We heard a man scream beyond the fog.

Madoka and I exchanged a glance.

“What was that?”

“The fog is too thick to see from here.”

It sounded surprisingly close by. We were near the edge of a cliff, but it was possible the wealthy area of the village was only a few meters down.

But at the same time, those snake Youkai known as Toubyou were slithering around below.

If we remained where we were, the rescue team would arrive. We had no reason to put ourselves in any more danger.

However…

“Hey, Shinobu-kun.”

“What?”

“What if that scream was from the rescue team?”

“…”

That possibility was too horrible.

I sighed and climbed down the short cliff to check on the scream.

Part 31 (Hishigami Mai)

After watching the final moments of the old woman who controlled Kusanagi, I opened the trunk of the car parked in the parking lot and pulled out the kit used to repair my body. Most of the cars had exploded after being caught up in the Kusanagi attacks. The area had become a sea of flames as if a napalm bomb had been gone off, but it had not reached my car.

“Y-you really are going to reconnect your right arm, aren’t you?”

Rather than sounding relieved, the Sunekosuri looked at me with a disturbed look in his eyes.

“This is half of the reason I am so valuable. I am more durable than a normal human and I can use all sorts of strategies to fake my death. I’m perfect for taking on the ninja-like role of crushing a giant organization after leading them astray with false information.”

“I-I cannot believe you can sew your body together with makeup equipment…”

“That’s just how the kit is disguised. Having a full set of skin-colored materials and precision tools is convenient.”

I temporarily sewed together my upper body that was on the verge of falling to pieces and returned the kit to the cosmetic pouch.

“Damn her. She cut through my breasts three or four times. Did she have some kind of grudge against breasts?”

“You don’t have to show me. And you don’t have to trace your fingers across them either.”

“What? Oh, stop blushing, Sunekosuri-chan. And are you the type of canine Youkai that is still aroused by human nudity?”

“Please do not stand there looking puzzled with those out in the open! Hurry up and cover yourself!!”

You do know the world I live in, right?

My environment isn’t kind enough to let me opt out of fighting if I’m

attacked while changing.

Even after mending my body, my workwear was still torn to shreds. I put them in my bag and changed into a tank top and hot pants.

“Okay, we’ve had a short break, so let’s go investigate the abandoned Zenmetsu Village.”

“Eh? B-but wasn’t that old woman the culprit behind all this?”

“Probably. But the changes have not completely stopped. After all, this corporate prison was supposed to have 8000 people between the prisoners and jailers. I see no sign of them returning.”

Of course, it had actually been the few of us who had disappeared, not those 8000.

“Now that you mention it…”

“The culprit is dead, but the Package she used is still running. If we don’t do something about it, we can never return.”

“Th-that’s terrible! Only the culprit could know how to do that! Why did you kill her!?”

“Sunekosuri-chan? Try to think back and remember whether that was any time to get greedy.”

I tossed the canine Youkai in the car’s passenger seat, sat in the driver’s seat, and turned the key.

We left through the main gate that no one was monitoring and drove down the sole road. After a while, we came across an abandoned rental car.

“What’s this? Do they have to flirt everywhere they go? And have they started to naturally attract misfortune too?”

I parked our rental car near this other one and got out, carrying my equipment and the Sunekosuri. Walking through a forest wearing the ridiculously revealing outfit of a tank top and hot pants was suicide, but I could mend my body even if it did get destroyed. Right now, I needed to force my way through.

“Wh-what is this? I am surrounded by nature, but I do not feel very comfortable…”

“That’s because the Kuroyama Electronics Group has a surveillance network spread out all throughout here. Unlike an Intellectual Village which is maintained down to the very foundation, the stench of machinery must be quite strong here.”

But I’m not detecting any hint of insects or wild beasts. Is that because this is the territory of the Toubyou and Orochi? They needed to preserve the quality of the underground water, so they wouldn’t use any pesticides.

We made our way out of the forest and into a run-down abandoned village.

“Where should we investigate?”

“That Kusanagi woman mentioned something about a shrine. Let’s try to find that. If we can find the roots of her techniques, we should be able to interpret what has been set up over the Four Mountains area.”

As we walked around through the fog, we came across an area where the wealthier villagers had gathered. We found some ruins there that had likely been the shrine in question.

However…

“Th-this does not look like it crumbled after rotting away.”

“It was destroyed by someone.”

The village here was jokingly called Zenmetsu Village. That was due to the slaughter that had occurred over 30 years ago. …But this looked older. It had been destroyed and left to rot before the annihilation had occurred.

Now.

I was a bit worried about pushing myself since I was only temporarily sewn together, but using force was my only option. I pushed away a portion of the mountain of rubble that had piled up on the floor.

“It looks like they just applied a lot of power to the outside to destroy it. The inside is almost untouched. Any writings are probably intact, too.”

“Did you just casually do something amazing? You did, didn’t you!?”

I ignored the Sunekosuri’s question and entered the hole in the pile of rubble I had created. As expected, I found a statue of the snake deity enshrined here, bundles of Japanese paper covered with old writing, and other items.

Hmm.

From what I could see, the old woman’s real name seemed to be Kawabata Megumi. She had said she had been an old woman for over 100 years and I doubted this was the name of a descendent.

Everything in the old bundles of paper looked meaningful, but one was mostly an account book. I tossed it aside for the moment.

“This seems to list the records of the village. It’s filled with a lot of personal opinions, though.”

The Four Mountains village had been started as a forced quarantine for those suffering from spiritual harm thanks to Youkai. Of course, it was done in the name of healing them.

The members of this shrine had been sent in to monitor and guide the people so they would not take any actions that would be dangerous to the outside world.

The shrine had split the members of the village into two factions below two different influential families and intentionally robbed them of the ability to battle the outside world by having too much internal conflict.

However…

The members of the shrine had only wanted to efficiently maintain their control over the Four Mountains village. They had not wished for the villagers’ deaths.

When social unrest had occasionally reared its ugly head due to lack of food and less gold dust, the villagers had begun killing their babies. The shrine had tried to put a stop to it but had failed.

When the villagers had tried to buy the Toubyou from outside, the shrine had interfered to stop that as well… And that was where the records ended.

In all likelihood, their role as controllers had been revealed and the villagers had branded them traitors and destroyed the shrine.

Humans are easily deceived, but not many of them like being deceived.

To correct a mistake.

This was why that old woman had stayed here in Four Mountains. The records were the most thorough in the section concerning the drowned babies. She may have given up trying to justify the infanticide and had instead tried to keep track of all the children who were killed before being given a name and then to properly mourn for all of them.

The village itself had been destroyed, so it would have been incredibly difficult to know who had given birth to who. However, it was possible the Kuroyama Electronics Group had a division or a report hidden away somewhere that they had used to ensure they had slaughtered all of the villagers and to ensure no information leaked out.

Honestly.

Once again, it's that kind noise that ends up killing a professional.

Just like a Package, it had to have taken a system using hundreds of people to maintain that Kusanagi. That was why it had been worth it for her to have the prisoners work for her on the promise of a jailbreak.

"What's written here looks like a conflict between the Orochi and the Toubyou. Is there nothing else?"

As I read through various bundles of paper, I finally found one discussing the ceremony for the shrine's rituals.

What's this?

It was one of the two influential families that had brought in the Toubyou. The other family had been researching a completely different Youkai, but they had moved toward the Toubyou when their original one seemed too dangerous.

That meant a non-serpentine Youkai had to have taken root in the village as well.

Hm.

Hm, hm, hm… Wait a second!!

“This is very bad, Sunekosuri!! If this is true, it’s much worse than the Toubyou or the Orochi!! At least in a certain way!!”

“Eh? Eh? Wh-what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about-…!!”

I trailed off because I had heard a man screaming in the distance.

I left the ruins of the shrine, but the fog was too thick to see very far. However, I recognized the voice.

“That detective.”

“Why are you calmly observing the situation!? Something happened to someone you know, right!? Then you need to go check on him!!”

Hm.

I don’t actually have any obligation to go that far.

If the information on that shrine’s rituals was accurate, it did not matter if you were a professional or an amateur. What mattered was gathering accurate data on what was occurring in the Four Mountains area. And to do that, I might need to ask that detective and my sister some questions.

“I have no choice. Sunekosuri, let’s go mix together our business lives with our personal lives a bit.”

Part 32 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

“Shit! Shit! What the hell is going on!?”

“Don’t, detective!!”

The rag-wearing man had supposedly been controlling the Youkai known as Toubyou, but he was now being swallowed by a lump of hundreds of the snakes.

I frantically tried to save him, but the mystery freak grabbed onto me from behind.

“Let go, you idiot! At this rate…!!”

“It’s already too late!! Even that man who held the right to control those possessing spirits was taken out. Those snake possessing spirits will never act kindly to a completely outsider like you!! If you approach, they’ll swallow you up as well!!”

“But!!”

It was not that I had all sorts of dreams about the job of police officer. This man had seemed suspicious and I did not believe everything he had told us. But was it okay to just let him die? I was not going to let someone else die before my eyes!

I could hear no screams.

The lump of snakes that had been so large was visibly growing smaller and smaller. That meant the rag-wearing man at the center was losing volume.

“The assembly of the Toubyou Package was incomplete from the beginning! It should be more surprising that it functioned up until now than that it failed now! The engine is already spewing smoke. If you get in the car, you will only be caught in the explosion! There is no safe area!!”

Finally, the snakes began disappearing before our eyes as if they were dissolving into the fog. Just as before, no trace was left of the man who had been enveloped by them. He had completely disappeared.

It was due to this lack of blood or a corpse that I was assaulted by a faint chill.

There was no hint of dignity here.

There was nothing left to bury in a grave. It was as if even the victim's death was being covered up.

That was when I heard someone walking through the dead grass.

"Uncle…?"

I recognized the voice.

I turned around and found my nephew Shinobu and…someone else. I recalled seeing the girl during the incident in that Fuuka Village hotel.

The mystery freak let out a surprised voice next to me.

"Oh, if it isn't Madoka."

"What are you doing here, Enbi?"

As the two girls spoke in high-pitched voices, I heard more footsteps coming from yet another direction.

This time, it was…

"Oh? If it isn't the detective and my little sister."

"…Th-this group gives me a very bad feeling."

It was the mystery freak's sister, Hishigami Mai, and a Youkai that I was fairly certain was a Sunekosuri. As a Youkai, it would dislike me, so its identity did not really matter to me.

Mai held a bundle of old Japanese paper she must have found somewhere. She spoke in a tone of utter annoyance.

"Is this everyone left? If not, this could be bad. We have no time."

…I think there was that man at the tollgate, too.

"Hey, wait. Do you know what's going on in the Four Mountains area? What do you mean there's no time?"

“How much do you know? If you haven’t figured out the Toubyou yet, this is going to be quite a lecture. If you’ve reached the Orochi, I’ll be a bit impressed. And if you’ve figured out the Youkai beyond that, I’ll hug you and bury your face in my tits.”

“The Youkai…beyond that…?” said my nephew Shinobu in a doubtful voice. “Also, that’s the first I’ve heard of an Orochi being involved in addition to the Toubyou. And you say there’s some other Youkai involved here, too!? What is it!?”

“The Toubyou was nothing more than a convenient gimmick. It was only the means to an end. It was used for the assembly involving the real Youkai.”

“Assembly? Onee-chan, is someone trying to create a Package using the power of some Youkai?”

“Something like that,” replied Mai clearly. “The Youkai behind this incident is a bit of an exception. Even when no Package is being created out of human malice, this Youkai still needs to be constructed by human hands. What is being assembled is the Youkai. It is being made into a form that can naturally exist.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” asked the Sunekosuri with a tilt of its head.

…I see she still doesn’t tell her allies the details of her plans.

“The traditions surrounding a Youkai hold important meaning, but this Youkai alone is different. The assembly becomes the true form rather than the Youkai itself.” Mai waved the bundle of Japanese paper as she arrived at the core of the issue. “The Aoandon. Have you ever heard of the mysterious existence that appears once the Hyakumonogatari has been completed?”

Part 33 (Hishigami Mai)

Now then.

Now then, now then, now then.

The detective, my sister, and the others likely could not read the old writing on the Japanese paper, so I had to explain it all to them.

“The Hyakumonogatari?” Jinnai Shinobu frowned. “That’s the thing where you light 100 candles and blow out a candle each time you tell a ghost story, right?”

“I’ve heard an alternate method that includes having 100 wicks in a single paper lantern …But wait. Is the thing that appears at the end a Youkai? I thought a ghost was supposed to appear in the dark room.”

“Technically, there is no real answer,” I readily replied. “Some say a supernatural phenomenon will occur such as a poltergeist or strange noises, some say the ghost of a dead human will appear, and some say a Youkai will appear. It is also unclear if it ends with nothing happening or if everyone there will be cursed. …However, a certain famous Youkai artist consolidated it all into a single existence known as the Aoandon. Nowadays, the Hyakumonogatari is ruled by the base structure of it being a Youkai that is *a female oni with pale blue skin.*”

“…Um, I don’t quite understand.”

This comment came from the girl I was fairly certain was named Kotemitsu Madoka.

She was a monster in the financial world. It was unfortunate she had no connections in the occult world, but as far as assets were concerned, she likely had the power to hire someone like me.

“Are Youkai really that vague? You make it sound like a Youkai came to be because someone drew an illustration of it…”

“It varies from case to case. Youkai like the Zashiki Warashi or Yuki Onna won’t be shaken so easily, but some Youkai have their role added on afterwards like the Nurarihyon.” I shrugged. “The Aoandon is a special Youkai that can only appear when people tell

ghost stories. Tsukumogami only become Youkai after years of being influenced by their environment. It seems the Aoandon has replaced that with 100 ghost stories. Just like Tsukumogami are prepared by their environment like wine or cheese, it is possible the Aoandon's characteristics can be tuned up by gathering high-quality ghost stories. …Simply put, it's a Youkai that can be easily altered by human hands."

"And you're saying that's related to what is happening in Four Mountains?" cautiously asked the detective. "A prisoner disappeared from his transport vehicle and a swarm of snake Youkai attacked… How is an Aoandon related to that?"

"It's at the core of it all." I waved the old Japanese paper around. "The person who caused all this…I suppose you could call her the culprit… Anyway, that old woman caused all this in order to make a certain wish of hers come true. But it would have been difficult by any normal means. That was why she got her hands on a Youkai that's characteristics could be freely remade like clay. She used it to acquire the occult power she wanted."

"And that was?"

"As I said, the form and abilities of the Aoandon can be shaped by the nature of the 100 ghost stories used. The old woman simply had to regulate the situation such that the Aoandon with the power she wanted would appear."

However, this was different from creating a Package that built a Youkai's power into it.

She was twisting the Youkai itself in a convenient direction.

In the past, I had run across someone who had tried to alter an Umbrella Obake and a Lantern Obake to create a controller for all Youkai in Japan like the Nurarihyon. This was something similar.

"Wait, onee-chan. But you need 100 ghost stories for that, right? I don't know anything about that. Has anyone told any scary stories? Or has it been someone other than us?"

"That area was altered. You could say the creepy ghost stories have been simplified quite a bit. They are all written here."

"?"

“The curving writing looks really old, so it looks like something from hundreds of years ago, right? But these were written quite recently. Although, I think it used a form of thoughtography to automatically write it rather than have someone physically right it out.”

“…What does it say?”

“Question 1: Why does Shinobu-kun cling to the girl next to him while he naps? Question 2: Rumor has it the junction was created for the sake of a gigantic semiconductor factory. Is that really true, though?”

“Eh…?”

Jinnai Shinobu was left speechless.

Kotemitsu Madoka also looked surprised, so these were likely puzzles related to them.

“Puzzles, riddles, Q&A. …It seems that is what is being used as the smallest form of the stories. In other words, once 100 puzzles have been answered in the Four Mountains region, the Aoandon Youkai will appear in the real world with a physical body. This is the womb created in preparation for that.”

“S-so that’s it,” groaned the detective. “Four Mountains is stained with a gruesome history thanks to Zenmetsu Village and the Kuroyama Electronics Group. And it has Youkai in it, too. If people begin chatting here, the essence of creepy and scary stories will naturally be mixed in. By throwing a set number of people in here, *they will create creepy puzzles and then answer them all on their own.*”

There was of course the corporate prison in addition to Zenmetsu Village.

I held up my index finger and twirled it around.

“The Toubyou were a convenient gimmick for creating this puzzle-solving story. You could say they are the ones pulling the strings behind the scenes. Those snake possessing spirits steal the necessary items from others’ houses, so they could be used for all sorts of things. For example…”

They could send those needed for the puzzle-solving to this alternate space.

If someone was having difficulty solving the puzzles, they could place an object nearby to act as a hint.

The appearance of the Toubyou themselves could be used to periodically raise the tension and create an atmosphere of needing to solve the puzzles to survive.

Then again, the Toubyou were possessing spirits that took the actions someone desired. It was difficult to think they had the will needed to act as the mastermind behind it all. It was an even more unfitting position than having the final boss be a computer with a heart.

As I explained it all, Jinnai Shinobu began speaking while almost in a daze.

“So it isn’t that we were separated from our classmates. Our classmates weren’t wandering around the forest as well. Madoka and I were the only ones needed for the Hyakumonogatari, so we were sent into some other space?”

“Dammit. So that’s why we found only Hasebe Michio in the forest and the police officers guarding him were nowhere to be found. And once someone was no longer needed to solve the puzzles, they were devoured by the snakes.”

It was all to complete the Hyakumonogatari as quickly as possible.

It was all to bring the Aoandon Youkai into reality. The Toubyou were nothing more than errand runners.

More people were not needed, so they had not been called onto the stage.

The complete lack of bugs and wild beasts was because animals were not needed to solve the puzzles.

To tell the Hyakumonogatari, the Toubyou had taken only those in Four Mountains who had been automatically judged to be useful. They had taken those people to “somewhere else”.

“Then how do we end all this? Can we give up on the Hyakumonogatari and leave Four Mountains? Or do we have to defeat the person who wants the Aoandon?”

That was the tricky part.

I sighed and said, “I have already defeated the culprit. However, the Hyakumonogatari-based assembly is still running. That means it is running on autopilot like a passenger plane without a pilot.”

The autopilot alone could not necessarily make a nice landing.

It was possible that old woman’s final words were now acting as a curse.

The Toubyou, the Orochi, and now the Aoandon.

“And I doubt the culprit who wanted to complete the Hyakumonogatari would have created a stage that would let the puzzle-solving participants escape. The Toubyou are powerful enough to drag us from reality and into some other place. This might be a dream, an illusion, some different coordinates, some different phase, the past, or the future, but it doesn’t matter. … Those snake possessing spirits can steal whatever is necessary, so they might automatically warp us right back into Four Mountains if we leave.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” asked Jinnai Shinobu with an audible gulp. “Can we not leave until the Hyakumonogatari is complete? But that means the Aoandon will appear!”

“Yes, it does. It looks like our only option is to have it appear and then defeat it. At any rate, our top priority is destroying the balance that prevents us from leaving the Hyakumonogatari stage. And to do that…”

I trailed off.

My next words never came.

I had realized something.

Shit! I just realized!! God dammit!!

I see! I see! So that’s it! I should have questioned it more when my hand and leg broke through the asphalt too easily when fighting the Kusanagi woman at the corporate prison or when I moved the ruins of the shrine barehanded so easily!! Even if my body has been altered, it should only be effective against Youkai!!

“Onee-chan, what is it?”

My sister's voice was cut off by a rustling sound.

It was the sound of the dead grass. However, this was no footstep.

It was the sound of small snakes slithering.

"This is bad. As I guessed, it looks like the completion of the Hyakumonogatari had something like a time limit."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Look around you."

The Sunekosuri let out a cry of fear before the detective could.

There were snakes.

A mountain of snakes.

The next thing we knew, everywhere we looked in all 360 degrees was filled with a tremendous amount of snakes. It was not that everything had been covered up by a giant swarm of snakes. It looked more like the landscape was made out of a giant mass of snakes.

In fact…

That may not have been wrong.

"Uuh!? What is going on? The ground is soft!!"

"Hey, detective, that man said the entire basin of Four Mountains functions as the Toubyou's jar, right? Does that mean…!?"

"Everything we saw – the ground, the mountains, the forest, the run-down buildings – was all…all…"

The detective looked down.

He likely regretted having done so.

The ground had transformed into a giant black carpet created from tons of snakes weaving around each other. The dead grass had turned into a collection of small, narrow snakes that looked like tubifex worms. If we had gone to the village, we would likely find the silhouettes of the buildings made out of snakes.

“Is everything here made from the Toubyou!? Everything but the people needed for the puzzle-solving was fake!?”

“It looks like the stage was made to destroy itself if the Hyakumonogatari was not completed within a given period of time. That may have been one of the conditions for creating the Aoandon. If the Aoandon with the abilities the culprit wanted was not created, it would all reset like this.”

“Reset…?” Jinnai Shinobu frowned. “You just said reset, right? This isn’t just cleaning up after slicing us to pieces, is it!?”

“If my estimation is correct,” I replied with a slow sigh. I gave the worst possibility I could think of. “This is probably not the first time we have attempted the Hyakumonogatari.”

“Wha-…?”

“From the fact that they can drag us to this ‘alternate location’, it is clear the Toubyou have been assembled in a convenient way. Their ability to steal whatever is necessary may go beyond simply manipulating distances and coordinates. It may allow them to grab objects from the past or future on the timeline.”

If the Aoandon was not completed, they would destroy everything and return it all to the initial point.

In other words, it was constructed in an eternal loop that would never end until the objective was complete.

“We have to go through that life-or-death situation again? Can’t we do something!? Isn’t there anything we can do other than watch this destruction happen!?”

“Tell me everything you know!! Let’s share our information. We are still here because there are still some puzzles remaining that we are supposed to solve. That means we have to share our information to solve them all. If we don’t find all 100 puzzles and solve them all, we can never escape Four Mountains! Our greatest weapon is inside our own heads!!”

At some point, the thick fog had disappeared.

I looked up at the blue sky that had appeared behind it, but then I grimaced.

In the sky, a pure black mouth opened wide.

No. It was all Toubyou. This went beyond just dozens or hundreds of them.

Were hundreds of millions if not billions of those snake Youkai monitoring us while creating a dome over the false Four Mountains area!?

When Jinnai Shinobu, the detective, and the others looked up into the sky as well, they were all left speechless.

Meanwhile, the black gradually ate into the blue of the sky. Over half of it was covered by snakes already.

“Well,” I muttered without thinking.

As if the surface tension of the liquid in a cup had passed its limit, a portion of the black sky crumbled.

“This chapter was a failure…”

Trying to think about evading or defending was useless.

Snakes literally poured down like a waterfall as they fell right onto our

Part 34 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“Ah!?”

I woke up.

I could feel an unpleasant sweat all across my body. My heart rate had increased to dangerous levels. For a moment, I was unsure where I was and it took me a bit to distinguish up from down and left from right.

…I’m on the bus.

It seemed I was on a tour bus driving down the highway.

“Hey, hey, Shinobu-kun.”

I heard Madoka speaking from next to me.

I thought she would also be uneasy due to being unable to keep up with the sudden change. However…

“Is this where I am supposed to ask ‘Shinobu-kun, why do you cling to the girl next to you while you nap?’ ”

Wait…

Wait!!

I remember this conversation.

Isn’t this just before we entered Four Mountains!?

“Jinnai, we’re almost to a zone simply filled with noteworthy things.”

That was my classmate known as the Love King.

Just his face was peering over the seat in front of me and he was saying the exact same things I had heard before.

“We’re almost at Four Mountains. The scenery will change once we leave the tunnel.”

Unlike the Love King, Madoka likely understood.

I exchanged a glance with her and it was clear that we were the only two enveloped in tension.

Which meant…

No, not again.

Once we passed through the tunnel, the bus driver, the guide, our classmates, and our homeroom teacher would all disappear and we would have to solve the puzzles of the Hyakumonogatari in that abandoned village filled with countless Toubyou.

Mai had said that had not been the first time. In that case, it must have been the fact that we had made it to the very end that we "remembered" this time.

There were 100 puzzles.

There were 100 answers.

Until they were all gathered and the Aoandon was born, we would have to repeat this again and again.

I began to panic, but I could not think of any way of escaping the situation.

Meanwhile, the tunnel approached like the mouth of some great monster.

The tour bus was swallowed up.

It did not matter how many times it took.

It did not matter if it lasted for all eternity.

Until the Hyakumonogatari was fully completed, Zenmetsu Village of Four Mountains would be waiting for me.

Afterword

Okay, Volume 3!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Some of you may be confused right now if you thought back to the Table of Contents. And yes, this is not where the Afterword should be. But due to the structure of this story, I thought it was best to cut the story off and place the Afterword here even if it destroys the entire meaning of the “after” in the term.

Having this entire story in a single chapter was also for the sake of a certain gimmick, but the actual story was not all that different from the four chapter structure used before. And with the Toubyou, Orochi, and Aoandon, the number of primary enemy Youkai was not that different either.

If I was doing a Youkai story, I really wanted use the Hyakumonogatari, but I didn’t think I could fit 100 ghost stories and then a final boss in a single volume. That is why I changed it up a bit. The stage of an abandoned village, a junction, and a giant factory along the highway is just a sign of my own tastes. The factory was something that I had some vague ideas about during a trip to gather material. I felt it was an important piece when talking about the modern scenery of rural Japan. Having that giant structure sitting right smack in the middle of a never-ending expanse of paddy fields seems so out of place. It’s an interesting subject that brings a lot of different ideas to mind.

Another unique characteristic of this volume was Kotemitsu Madoka appearing from the beginning to the end.

I created her as an extreme version of the high school girl who the adults cannot control and whose thoughts cannot be easily read. For example, she showed no open gratitude or kindness to Jinnai Shinobu when he protected her from the mysterious attacker in that creepy abandoned village. Instead, she watched him cautiously and with cold eyes as he grew arrogant upon acquiring the weapon. I think that would be the most obvious scene of that.

Madoka was thrown onto a stage where her strongest characteristic

of money was of no use. But like the stars in the night sky that are not usually visible from the neon of the city, I think this setting allowed some of her humanity to show up. What did you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. This time, I think the Japanese horror-style of abandoned village was harder than the Youkai involved. I am truly grateful that they have stuck with me this far.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I apologize for not having any love comedy style events despite being a school trip story. I hope you will continue reading in the future, too.

And I will end this here.

By the way, I have prepared a continuation that will begin after this.

Please continue reading once you have found the 100 puzzles and the 100 answers.

Everyone has their own way of enjoying things, but if you have not met that requirement and you have some time, it might be fun to go back to the beginning with pen and paper to take the challenge again.

If this was primarily a horror series, it might have ended here.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Epilogue

“…Solved it.”

I quietly opened my eyes on the tour bus.

Sweat covered my body and I was breathing heavily.

Unlike my other classmates who were restless due to the great event of the school trip, I was clearly exhausted.

I wanted someone to tell me it was only natural for me to be this tired.

In the end, we had reattempted the loop more times than I could remember.

I had not made it to the final time limit every single time. Once, I had been strangled to death by a middle-aged man wearing an orange prison uniform. Once, Madoka had crushed my head with a giant rock because she had reached her psychological limit.

If at least one person made it to the final time limit, it seemed we managed to retain our memories during the next attempt. …That meant there had to have been times when no one made it and we simply did not remember them.

Even so, we had solved it.

We had found the 100 puzzles and 100 answers scattered around the Four Mountains region. That included Zenmetsu Village and the semiconductor factory…no, the corporate prison.

“Shinobu-kun?”

Madoka was looking worriedly toward me from the neighboring seat. Just like my uncle, Hishigami Mai, and the others, Madoka had to have attempted the puzzle-solving just as many times as I had.

I did not have the mental leeway to smile and say something in response.

None of it was over yet.

Once we found the 100 puzzles and answered them all, I had been returned to the tour bus. We were just about to enter the tunnel leading to Four Mountains.

For an instant, I wondered if we were mistaken about solving every question and we had actually missed something. But that could not be.

We had solved them all.

We had ended it.

In that case, the real fight began here. The true essence of the Hyakumonogatari was not telling the countless ghost stories. It was after they had been told and after every single one of the lantern's 100 wicks or the 100 candles had been blown out.

"Madoka…"

I began to urge Madoka to be on her guard.

But I was too late.

Before I could, the tour bus was swallowed up by the great monstrous mouth of the tunnel.

The atmosphere of the bus completely changed.

Every single time we had repeated the process before, a change had occurred the instant we left the tunnel. This was different. The change had already made its way inside the bus as if we had switched over to a different set of rails. Everyone but me had disappeared from the bus. My classmates were gone, my homeroom teacher was gone, the bus guide was gone, the driver was gone, and even Madoka was gone.

"…"

I could see the change thanks to the tunnel's illumination.

However, that light itself was odd.

The tunnel had never had illumination before. It had been completely dark. That was why I had been filled with so much fear and confusion when sent from the bus to the Four Mountains forest.

But…

Now…

The tunnel was filled with a pale blue light as if it was an aquarium. That light eerily lit the inside of the bus.

And in that vehicle my classmates, my teacher, the bus guide, and the driver had disappeared from, another figure had appeared.

It was as if a switch had been thrown.

It was as if this new figure had swapped out with those who had disappeared.

A narrow, narrow aisle existed down the center of the bus between the seats. The figure was in the center of that. In that very center point of the bus, a woman stood as if she were the lead in a play.

She wore a white kimono.

Her hair was long and black.

Her skin was so thin it looked transparent. That skin looked pale and blue, but that may have just been due to the tunnel's lighting.

The most noticeable characteristic was on her forehead.

From its very center stuck out something that looked more like a thin, sharp blade than a horn.

She was the Aoandon.

She was the blue female oni that was a unification of all the strange phenomena said to appear after the Hyakumonogatari.

"This is the birth canal." The female oni spoke with a gentle smile within that blue tunnel. "Normally, I would have waited a bit longer, but you are special. I thought it would be best for you to face me before the rest of the world."

“Why me?”

I slowly stood up from my seat.

I was just a high school student. I was not a card battling onmyouji or an exorcist who could wield spiritual power. I was not the sort of person who should be standing face to face with a monster like this Aoandon.

But it had been my ability that had gotten me this far.

That may have meant I had the qualifications to stand on this final stage. But even so, I could not help but feel it was too convenient.

“There were other puzzle-solvers in Zenmetsu Village…no, in the entire Four Mountains area. There was my uncle and Hishigami Mai. Why not them? I thought we would all be gathered together at the end.”

“No, no.” The Aoandon’s attitude did not change. “What matters in the Hyakumonogatari is building up the ghost stories. The storytellers’ accomplishments, abilities, and histories are of no relevance. That is why what makes you special is not a specific quality. It is nothing more than the fact that you happened to answer the 100th and final puzzle.”

It could have been anyone.

I had just happened to be the one.

If the situation had been slightly different, the one standing here could have been Madoka or that canine Youkai known as a Sunekosuri.

That was all.

The Aoandon. To that blue female oni who had built up her appearance in the real world on a foundation of fear and tragedy, the participants and people concerned were worth no more than that.

I narrowed my eyes in that blue tunnel that seemed to continue forever without ending.

“…What are you going to do now?”

“A good question.”

“You are not the same as other deadly Youkai. In fact, you are an oddity even among Aoandon. You are an artificially created Youkai specially tuned up to complete the objective of that old woman who wielded Kusanagi. But now that you are smiling here in front of me, I doubt you are nothing more than that old woman’s tool. After all…”

“It doesn’t really matter,” replied the Aoandon, cutting me off.

This was not because she had a definite answer. She simply refused to give it any real thought.

“My structure was put together by that old woman and I was actually built by you and the others, but I have no obligation to do what any of you tell me. I may feel a debt of gratitude, but it is not enough to actually give anything back in return.”

The Aoandon’s long hair shook.

“But I am excited. That much is true. Yes, I am very excited. I cannot wait to see the wide, wide world beyond this blue birth canal.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“Even though I’m being honest?”

“What do you want to do in that wide world? I doubt you just want to go sightseeing.”

“Well, I am a deadly Youkai. I am a deadly Youkai that appears before the fools that take supernatural phenomena such as spirits and Youkai too lightly. In other words, I am a symbol of punishment for those who take forbidden actions. If you call me a Youkai that automatically detects the criminals across Japan, it sounds quite heroic and fun, right?”

“You are not something that convenient.”

“You shouldn’t make assumptions. Treating me like that just because I am a deadly Youkai is discrimination.”

“…I went through so much tragedy again and again. If you really were a Youkai that cares about humans, you would regret what led to your creation. But I don’t see even a hint of that in you.”

She was not a Youkai that would systematically bring death regardless of good or evil.

She was not a Youkai one could exist with if one was careful about the conditions.

I’m not entirely sure how to explain it, but there was something fundamentally different between her and the Zashiki Warashi or Yuki Onna. There were some Youkai who would bring illness or death to anyone who simply “met” them, but the fear she gave me was different even from that.

If I had to give a word to it, it was an issue of self-assertion.

The Yuki Onna and Nekomata back home had the ability to bring death to people, but their individual personalities were distinct from that.

However, I could not sense that sort of distinction in this Aoandon. It was as if her ability to bring death was casually lined up right alongside the beauty of her hair or the great size of her breasts. If she were introducing herself or showing of a hidden skill to calm down a crowd, someone would end up dead. I felt a different sort of fear than with a great demon king who acted on simple and obvious ambition.

“That’s true,” said the Aoandon with a laugh. Her shoulders shook and she covered her exposed teeth with the fan in her hand. “I am the generalized form of the supernatural phenomena that appear at the end of the Hyakumonogatari. The target does not matter. The human ideas of good or evil do not matter. Even if the 50th story was told by some country’s president, I will attack whatever completely ordinary person told the 100th. But,” continued the Aoandon with a word of denial, “what does that matter? That’s how it works with deadly Youkai. From the looks of you, I would say you are used to being around Youkai. The death we bring is no different from an accident involving falling rocks. No one is at fault. That is the system society currently uses.”

“And?”

“I may have created this confrontation, but it is actually meaningless. After all, you should already know that this is how Youkai are and that you can coexist with them regardless. You have no real reason to stop me from being released here.”

That may have been true.

It may have been true that I came in contact with Youkai like it was normal in my Intellectual Village.

She had the ability to bring death. I was not about to say that was enough to punish Youkai or that we needed to slaughter every deadly Youkai. If I was going to say that, I would also need to kill off every last dog that had enough power to kill a child and I would have to chop off everyone’s arms as they could be used to strangle someone.

This was the same.

She had the power to bring death. That alone could not be judged.

However…

“I have a simple reason not to let you go.”

“?”

“I’m not interested in the law. I have no interest in the Aoandon species as a whole. I only care about this specific incident.”

“Oh?”

“It seems you are the Aoandon created from the Hyakumonogatari put together in Four Mountains. But could you really not do anything until it was completed? Not a single thing? It’s possible you really were too weak to do anything, but even then, surely there was a better way to end this. And if you sat idly by while Yokoeda, Hasebe, and the Kusanagi woman suffered and died in Four Mountains… If you did that just so the Hyakumonogatari would be completed…”

“Hm. It would be easy enough to give a yes or no answer, but I doubt you would believe me.”

“Then you should have killed off the puzzle-solvers once they were no longer needed. You shouldn’t have been kind enough to give me a chance to fight back.”

“Ha ha.” The Aoandon laughed while showing the teeth that had been hidden behind her fan. “What you are saying is completely scattered and sometimes contradictory. Is this inability to focus on your own abilities what it is to be human? Now I’m even more intrigued about the outside world.”

“You understand that you have made me your enemy, right?”

“So what if I have? I am the symbol of the Hyakumonogatari. You could say I have almost any supernatural phenomena that are harmful to humans. Mysterious fevers, blindness, food poisoning, suspicious fires at the participants’ houses, and even natural disasters that cover entire regions. How is a normal high school boy who cannot even use a single homa altar or Shikigami supposed to stand up me?”

In that moment, a new light appeared.

It was the tunnel's exit. We were approaching the exit of what the Aoandon called the birth canal. Once the bus exited the tunnel, the previously unstable existence of the Aoandon would be released into the world at large.

Most likely, the Aoandon was completely right that I could not overcome that pale blue female oni by force. If the fear of the Hyakumonogatari was only on a level where you would be fine if you had a Buddhist monk on hand, that pain-in-the-ass ritual would never have spread so far. That Aoandon had enough power to draw a clear line between herself and a normal deadly Youkai.

However…

I was a participant in this Hyakumonogatari.

And that meant I could do something that an unrelated professional could not!

"Question 101: Who was truly controlling the Toubyou?"

"What?" asked the Aoandon in confusion.

I continued regardless.

"Answer 101: The Aoandon. She could not influence the real world until the Hyakumonogatari was complete, but she wanted to guide the Hyakumonogatari to completion. She used the Toubyou to make those preparations."

"What are you-…?"

"Question 102: What is the occult meaning of the blue light filling the tunnel? Answer 102: The original tradition for the Hyakumonogatari was to illuminate the room with a lantern covered in blue Japanese paper. It is modeled after that. Question 103: Why did the Aoandon appear as a pale blue female oni wearing a white kimono? Answer 103: When an Edo period Youkai artist created a visual representation of the supernatural phenomena, he used that form and that form has spread ever since. Originally, the Aoandon was likely a vague collection of supernatural phenomena."

"What are you mumbling…? No, wait. There is meaning in the

Hyakumonogatari having 100 stories rather than 98 or 99. So if more than that are given, does it introduce some kind of bug…!?”

“And unfortunately for you, we’re still in the birth canal. You may have collected the 100 ghost stories, but you have yet to fully appear. The Hyakumonogatari is only complete once the Aoandon appears in the real world, so that stage is still active!! And as a participant in this Hyakumonogatari, any story I finish should be counted toward the total number!!”

“…!?”

A sound rang out as if something had attached to the bus window that was filled with blue light.

It was a single sutra-like piece of text written in sloppy writing.

Each time I gave a question and answer, words of pure white light that did not suit that blue world would fill the window.

“There was meaning in having exactly 100 rather than 98 or 99. Then what about 110? Or how about 120? As the number leaves that perfect framework, the golden ratio holding your body together will crumble. Once we leave the tunnel, will you be able to maintain that form? If a fatal error occurs, you will be unable to exist from the instant you are born!!”

The Aoandon said nothing more.

All calm had left her face. She was now merely expressionless. Bluish-white phosphorescence appeared at the end of the horn on her forehead. The Aoandon was a female oni who was not originally meant to have any form. It was as if she were strengthening her supernatural power as a Youkai by taking on this symbolism in accordance with her name.[3]

By the time that thought came to mind, she had already vanished from before my eyes.

She had been directly before me just a moment before, but now there was only an overwhelming blast of wind as something horrific approached.

Was she trying to stop the error in the number of stories from growing? Would killing me cause another reset because we were still inside the Hyakumonogatari? Was she merely taking out her

anger on me? Or was this simply the type of being she was?

However, the Aoandon's sharp claws and fangs did not reach my throat.

A white light filled the entire area.

The tour bus had left the tunnel.

"…Ah."

I was standing alone in the narrow aisle. The Aoandon was gone. My classmates filled the many seats and the bus guide and driver were back as well. The nervous female homeroom teacher in the front seat looked at me standing alone in the aisle and hesitantly spoke up.

"U-um, Jinnai-kun? I know you are excited, but that is dangerous. Please return to your seat. And stop pointing forward in such a decisive and youth-filled pose."

A bit of laughter filled the bus.

I blushed and returned to my seat next to Madoka.

"…Shinobu-kun."

"Don't say it. My heart is even more brittle than crystal, so poking at it any more will make it shatter…"

"What happened with the final boss? From the look of things, I take it I was left out."

My shoulders finally relaxed as I leaned back in my seat.

"I somehow managed to end it. The Hyakumonogatari ceremony itself is a part of the Aoandon, but I managed to cause a bug that made her destroy herself. I caused a fatal error."

"I see."

Madoka must not have entirely understood because her face was still cloudy.

She placed a hand on her small chin and thought for a while.

Finally, she seemed to have made up her mind.

“Um, Shinobu-kun.”

“What is it?”

“This question may be a bit abrupt, but…”

“Just ask it.”

“One hundred puzzles scattered around Zenmetsu Village and the Four Mountains area were solved. But were we really the ones solving them?”

“…What?”

“One of the members of the group we assumed were the puzzle-solvers was the Sunekosuri. If a Youkai like him would count, isn’t there another possibility? Remember what made up the stage we stood on.”

That place had been created by thousands, millions, or even billions of snake Youkai known as Toubyou.

And they had taken action to complete the Hyakumonogatari.

“Wait, wait!”

“*What if our ideas of who was asking the questions and who was answering them were backwards?*”

In all likelihood, Madoka herself did not want to believe it.

She may have been speaking her concern in the hope that I would deny it.

“What if we were not answering the puzzles hidden in Four Mountains? What if we were brought there to create the questions and the snakes making up the Four Mountains area were automatically solving them? What if we were brought back to the beginning every time we did not create exactly 100 questions or the snakes were unable to answer all of them?”

But just as I began to argue against the idea, I realized something.

Had my counterattack truly defeated the Aoandon? Hadn’t that Youkai said she had only called me into that blue birth canal on a whim?

She had pretended to be defeated.

Had she had played along as thanks for preparing the 100 questions? Or had it been an act to ensure the much more dangerous Hishigami Mai would let her guard down and allow the Aoandon to escape?

At any rate, what weighed on my mind was…

“Was she truly defeated?” I muttered blankly.

No one could answer that, so I could only ask another question.

“Did I even have the qualifications needed to defeat her?”

The fog had cleared up nicely.

I stood on the shoulder of the giant cross-shaped junction and watched the tour bus carrying Jinnai Shinobu and Kotemitsu Moadoka leave.

To be honest, Jinnai Shinobu-kun had done quite well. It had not counted since he was not one of the snakes sitting in a circle and discussing everything who were the true answerers. However, I would have been defeated had that counted.

Now then.

Had that old woman who had made the preparations for me realized I existed yet? She may have prepared some nasty system to make use of me as a Shikigami.

But she was too naïve.

It would not be that convenient.

The conclusion of the Hyakumonogatari had to be uncontrollable even for the one who had prepared it all.

“…”

It looked like the tour bus would safely make its way through Four Mountains.

But even so, Uchimaku Hayabusa and Hishigami Enbi would track

down the truth of Hasebe Michio, and Hishigami Mai and the Sunekosuri would destroy the corporate prison. The old woman who would possibly try to forcibly control me might be taken out in the process. Then there would be no problem.

“What should I do now?”

I looked around the area.

The highway continued north, south, east, and west from the junction. It connected to the entire country of Japan. I could go anywhere and do anything.

For now…

“Heyyy!”

Still standing on the shoulder of the highway, I held out my thumb to try to hitchhike.

A tanker truck passed by and a small family car honked as if threatening me. I gained nothing more than exhaust-filled wind in the face.

The world was a cold place.

Youkai were sturdy creatures, so I considered tackling the next vehicle head on. However, that was when a mid-sized truck turned on its blinker. It passed by and pulled over a short distance away.

I walked over to it and a middle-aged man stepped out of the driver’s seat.

“What is it, miss? Playing on the highway is dangerous.”

“Help me.”

“What? …From that horn, I take it you’re a Youkai.”

“I was left behind, so give me a ride.”

“Hmm,” groaned the man.

Killing him and stealing the truck sounds fun, but I don’t have a license. No ho ho.

As I thought that, the man finally made up his mind.

Tch.

What a disappointment.

“Sure. Now, miss, where do you need to go?”

“Well…”

I looked around from where I stood at the center of the junction.

The roads continued on to anywhere I wanted to go. They spread out in every direction.

I thought for a bit.

And I gave nothing more than a casual response.

“Just that way a bit.”

Now, it was time to begin wandering.

As the gatherer of so many ghost stories, it was time to begin spreading new fear.

Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ Zenmetsu means “annihilation”.
2. ↑ He's thinking of a shide.
3. ↑ Aoandon means “blue lantern”.

Backward to Volume 2 Forward to Volume 4